

# His Prayer

*John 17*

*(verses 1-5)*

1. His Prayer is for God to Glorify Him
2. His Prayer is for God to be Glorified in Him
3. Their Glory is in His Suffering and Death

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### **John 17**

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As then-president Ronald Reagan was preparing for his weekly radio address in 1984, the technicians needed to do an off the air sound-check. Reagan famously made an off-hand joke, only to find out later that it was recorded and broadcast. Instead of doing the typical, "test, test, test, one two three," Reagan said, "My fellow Americans, I'm pleased to tell you today that I have signed legislation that will outlaw Russia forever. We begin bombing in five minutes." That went over famously with his supporters, and made his opposition rabid.

He wasn't the only politician to fall victim to an open-mic mistake. Honestly, most of them I can't repeat because almost all of them are too vulgar! These seem to happen more and more, as recently as the last election, when Donald Trump was recorded saying some terrible things. We should always be careful of what we say, because someone is always eavesdropping! And usually no good thing can come from eavesdropping, but that's not true in our current sermon series. We are eavesdropping on Jesus' prayer, and it's okay because that's why it's there.

Let me explain: We are in the second of a four-part series today called "His Prayer," looking at John 17. The entire chapter records Jesus' prayer. It's often called "The High Priestly Prayer," because Jesus, our high priest, is praying for himself, and his disciples, and us.

This prayer is recorded in Scripture so that we *can* listen in on it. In fact, Jesus prayed this prayer *in front of* his disciples because he *intended* for them (and us) to overhear what he was praying about. In this prayer, Jesus is praying, declaring, modeling, and teaching – all at the same time, all in one prayer. So we are going to eavesdrop.

Also, this sermon series is an excellent journey for us to take as we prepare for Easter, because John records this prayer as the last actual thing that happened before Jesus was arrested, tortured, crucified, killed, buried, and then rose from the dead. In every way, this is an important prayer for us to eavesdrop on, to learn from, and to allow it to change our lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Resources: William Greathouse, "Beacon Bible Commentary: Vol. 8." Kenneth Chafin, "The Communicator's Commentary." William Barclay, "Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of John, Part One." John Barry, "Faithlife Study Bible." Joseph Dongell, *John: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 1997) D. A. Carson, *The Farewell Discourse and Final Prayer of Jesus: An Evangelical Exposition of John 14-17* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1980)

Last week we began by honing in on verse three. We saw that Jesus gave us a definition of eternal life, that he wasn't talking about "duration" of life, even though we all live forever – it's just a question of where we will live forever, right? But Jesus made the point that eternal life is about having God-quality life here, in this world, as well as forever someday. And the way to gain that life is by being in a deep, intimate relationship with God, growing closer and closer to him, which can only be done through Jesus Christ, his Son.

Now, there's a lot going on around that verse that we are going to look at today. Let me read the first five verses again. Would you join me in honoring God's Word by standing as I read it to us?

"After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: 'Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.'" (John 17:1-5, niv)

Thank you for standing – would you please be seated.

I mentioned this last week, but you probably noticed that the passage begins by saying, "After Jesus had said these things..." and you might wonder what "those things" are that Jesus said. If you are asking that question, then well done! You are asking the right questions as a student of the Word. The reason that phrase is there, is because it is telling us that what Jesus said *before* this prayer is really important in understanding what he is praying about. And we'll see the importance of that in a minute. But before we get into that, let me just point out that Jesus begins his prayer by praying for *himself*. Sometimes you might think it's selfish to pray for yourself and your needs, but it's really okay to do so, because that's exactly what Jesus is doing here. However, there's something very important, and that is, *how* we pray for ourselves is as important as *that* we pray for ourselves. The way that Jesus prays for himself teaches us a lot about his heart and priorities, and about how we want to pray.

First, though, let's set the context. This prayer comes after several chapters of Jesus' discourse, or his final words to his disciples.

Back in chapter twelve, Mary anointed Jesus when she broke open her expensive perfume and poured it on his feet. Jesus went from there to Jerusalem, where the people welcomed him with praises and palm branches – that took place on a Sunday. Jesus began teaching the people that he was about to be killed – condemned by the very people praising him.

After being in Jerusalem for a few days, Jesus gathered with his disciples in the upper room for their Passover celebration – what would become their Last Supper. I want to remind you, too, that from here on in chapters 13-17, even though it is written across several chapters, it is all happening in one event, on one evening.

After the Last Supper, Jesus took the position of a lowly servant and washed the disciples' feet. Peter rejected this action until Jesus gently rebuked him. Then Jesus began to teach them about how he would be betrayed and arrested. Peter declared he would defend Jesus to the death, but Jesus foretold correctly that Peter would actually deny three times that he even knew Jesus. Jesus was very clear with them that he was going to be put to death. The disciples were shocked and saddened.

But he comforted them, and reminded them that Jesus' death was necessary if they were going to have the kind of relationship with God that he had taught them and demonstrated to them during their three years together. In fact, Jesus' death was the *only* way they would be able to have that relationship with God. But more than that, Jesus told them, his death would pave the way for the Holy Spirit to fill them and transform them and they would be able to obey him all the time; that they would be able to abide with Jesus like a vine abides with the branch. He also warned them that they too would suffer and be persecuted, but that through it all they would have the Holy Spirit with them.

All this would happen because Jesus was going to die. The disciples were filled with grief at the idea; all their dreams and plans for Jesus being the king, and for their being high-ranking attendants in Jesus' kingly court, all those dreams were dashed. Worse yet, the one they loved – the one they gave up everything to follow – had spent the entire evening telling them that he was about to be betrayed, tortured, and crucified, and that it was *necessary* – there was nothing they could do to stop it, despite Peter's protestations.

Jesus tried to comfort them in their confusion and their grief, and reminded them:

“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”  
(John 16:33, niv)

So then, after telling them *all* of that, Jesus prayed, and that's what gets us to where we are today, beginning with Jesus' prayer for himself. In that context, Jesus prayed in front of the disciples, showing first that...

## **1. His Prayer is for God to *Glorify Him***

This might seem kind of strange, but Jesus is asking God to glorify Jesus. How many times have you prayed for God to glorify yourself? I'm guessing you haven't, and neither have I. We usually associate that kind of prayer with pride and self-seeking. And we're right to be careful about that kind of thing. “[Americans, especially,] have tremendous faith in themselves. In 1950, the Gallup organization asked high school seniors, ‘Are you a very important person?’ And at that point 12 percent said yes. They asked the same question in 2005 and 80 percent said, ‘Yes, I am a very important person.’ Time magazine asked Americans, ‘Are you in the top one percent of earners?’ Nineteen percent of Americans said they are in the top 1 percent of earners. Americans score 25th in the world in math, but if you ask Americans, ‘Are

you really good in math?' [they often say yes]. We are number-one in the world at thinking we are really good at math."<sup>2</sup>

That's the kind of pride we try to avoid because we know it's wrong. In the Bible, James reminds us,

"Scripture says: 'God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.'  
(James 4:6, niv)

...and Proverbs says,

"When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom."  
(Proverbs 11:2, niv)

So if Jesus is praying that God would glorify him, isn't he displaying that same kind of prideful attitude that we know is wrong? Well, no – for a couple of reasons. One is because of who he is, and the other is because of what he means.

First of all, Jesus can pray this prayer because, plain and simple, he IS God. So for Jesus to be glorified means that God the Father is glorified, and that is a primary motive of Jesus. We have to interpret this prayer in part by what Jesus said in John 8. The Pharisees were accusing Jesus of being demon-possessed, and so Jesus responds by saying that if he was demon-possessed, he would not be seeking to glorify God:

"I am not seeking glory for myself; but there is one who seeks it, and he is the judge." (John 8:50, niv)

And then he goes on to say:

"If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me." (John 8:54, niv)

So when Jesus prays for God to glorify him, he is actually saying something specific: he is saying that he wants his life to achieve the purpose that he had come into this world to accomplish. Jesus said:

"My food,' said Jesus, 'is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.'" (John 4:34, niv)

The Bible tells us that he came to die in our place, to be the sacrifice for our sins, to bring us into relationship with God the Father:

"For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit." (1 Peter 3:18, esv)

In other words, when Jesus was praying for God to glorify him, he could do that because he is God himself, so when one gets glorified the other does, too. But he was also praying to be glorified because he was saying that he wanted to be obedient to

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from David Brooks, *"Transcript of David Brooks—The Gathering 2014,"* The Gathering (10-2-14)

God, that he surrendered his will to the Father's will, so that God could accomplish his purposes for Jesus. *That's* why Jesus prayed in the Garden before his crucifixion:

"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." (Matthew 26:39, niv)

Far from being a self-seeking prideful glory-grabbing prayer, this was a prayer of stepping aside for the Father's purposes and a prayer of supreme surrender and obedience. So when you and I pray, we should not ask God to give us glory, but we should pray to surrender ourselves and ask God to fulfill his purposes for our lives.

Then we need to see that next is...

## 2. His Prayer is for God to be ***Glorified in Him***

Now we are seeing the flip side of this prayer; you really can't have the first without the second. If Jesus is glorified, God is glorified.

But think about this: Jesus knew *exactly* what he was about to face. He knew he was going to be arrested, tortured beyond recognition, crucified, and die in the most excruciating, humiliating way. Remember we already saw that he prayed:

"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." (Matthew 26:39, niv)

It's not like he was looking forward to it, but he was committed to go through this horrible pain and suffering. Again, God would be glorified by Jesus' obedience – even to the point of death on the cross. By going through this suffering, he was about to prove that there was nothing that the love of God was not prepared to do and suffer for humankind, and that there was literally no limit to the love of God. The Gospel story makes it quite clear that Jesus could have escaped what was ahead for him; he could have escaped the cross. Instead, he chose obedience. His deepest desire was that in everything he did, God would be glorified.

Now, we might expect Jesus to do these things, but what does that mean for us? How does this help us to know how to pray?

I think that often, when we are going through something really bad – whether it is difficult circumstances, or a painful diagnosis from the doctors, or whatever it might be – when we are going through something bad, we sometimes make the assumption that, if this thing we are going through feels *bad*, then God must not be in it. God is good, this thing is bad, therefore God isn't in it. So we pray for things to change. We pray for God to take us out of this bad situation and put us into where he is. Or, we pray for God to change this situation, so that he can be in it.

But one of the powerful lessons that we learn from Jesus' prayer and his experience is that God is in the painful circumstances. God is in the painful experiences. God is in the suffering. God was in Jesus' suffering, and that was the way he would be glorified. Don't assume God is not in the badness. It's okay to ask to be removed from it, or to ask for it to be removed from you. But whether God does nor not,

realize God IS in your suffering. He isn't "over there" and you are here. He is with you in it. The Bible reminds us:

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: 'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:35-39, niv)

Your painful circumstance, whatever suffering you may be going through, does not mean God is absent; NOTHING can separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord!

We can be assured of this from Jesus' prayer, because we see that for both the Father and the Son...

### **3. Their *Glory* is in His *Suffering* and *Death***

We've seen that the Father is glorified in the Son and the Son is glorified in the Father. We've seen that Jesus is glorified because he is obedient to the Father. We've seen that the Father is present in suffering, and therefore can be glorified. Now we see in Jesus' prayer that God – Father and Son – are glorified in Jesus' suffering because the crucifixion means Jesus' work was finished. The crucifixion was not God's plans gone awry; it was not God turning the devil's defeat into Jesus' victory. The suffering and crucifixion of Jesus was EXACTLY God's plan. The worst, most humiliating, shameful, evil thing that could ever happen to God was to be tortured, mocked, spit on, and hung naked on a cross until he died. This was GOD himself. If anything could appear to be the very opposite of good, this was it in every way. And yet this was exactly God's plan; Father and Son were about to be glorified BECAUSE Jesus suffered and died, not in spite of it.

We want to have a theology that helps us avoid suffering, don't we? We want a theology that rescues us from suffering. But here, instead, we have a theology that leads us right into suffering.

The New Testament writes a great deal about our needing to associate with Jesus in his suffering. Paul wrote in Philippians:

"For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him." (Philippians 1:29, niv)

Again, he wrote this:

"I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death."  
(Philippians 3:10, niv)

Jesus said:

“Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me.”  
(Matthew 10:38, niv)

Peter wrote:

“To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.” (1 Peter 2:21, niv)

The New Testament does not promise us a way out of suffering in this life; it promises us a way *through* it. It says:

“For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.” (2 Corinthians 1:5, niv)

God was glorified in all of Christ’s suffering because it was only through the suffering that Jesus was able to finish his work.

Rather than always attempting to avoid suffering, we need to see it the same way. Scripture tells us:

“Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.” (Romans 5:3-5, niv)

Is your idea of suffering being challenged like mine is? Are you having to embrace the hard truth like I am, that as a Christian, you are to welcome suffering, not run from it?

We can pray for it to be removed, but can we also pray, “Not my will, but yours?” Can we also pray, “Accomplish your purposes in me, *IN* this suffering, not in spite of it or around it, but through it.”?

Now let me pause here and help us with something: I am not saying that God *causes* our suffering. I am saying that God is able to accomplish his will for your life *through* the suffering, but he doesn’t cause it. Romans 8 tells us this:

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28, niv)

To be called according to God’s purpose means to follow Jesus, even right smack through the middle of suffering. And while God doesn’t cause our suffering, he will work through our suffering, and he will do it in a way that is for our very good when we love God and are following him. This is exactly why the Apostle Paul could say:

“I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.” (Philippians 4:11-13, niv)

This is why the Bible instructs us:

“Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.” (1 Thessalonians 5:18, niv)

We can do that because we know that God is both present in, and through, our suffering. We are not left to suffer alone.

My friend, Jesus has been through suffering, and by going through suffering, he is present in your suffering. More than that, he will accomplish his purposes for you through your suffering.

You can pray that God would glorify you, and that you would glorify God, by being obedient to him no matter what – even if he doesn't remove your suffering. He is not absent from it; he is with you in it. And he will bring about your very best in it. Can you ask God to be glorified through your suffering?

Jesus prayed that, and as a result, we can all be saved. Perhaps, if we prayed for God to be glorified in our sorrows, grief, and suffering, others would also see God and turn to him.

In the midst of our pain and suffering, are we obedient? Do we glorify Christ, so that others will see him?