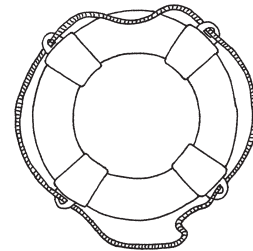


Contents

Preface.....	1
1. The Greatest Prayer Ever Prayed.....	3
2. Prayer: Basic Training.....	25
3. Three Remarkable Gifts.....	43
4. What Happened “Before the World Was”	59
5. The Dynamics of Discipleship.....	81
6. Saved and Safe	101
7. The Man Who Should Never Have Been Born	119
8. What? In the World?	141
9. Saints Are Very Special.....	165
10. Christian United—or Untied?	183
11. The World, the Church, and the Father.....	205
12. Priorities.....	225

Preface



The time has come for the church to get its priorities in order, and one of the best ways to do this is to find out what was important to Jesus Christ. John 17—our Lord’s “High Priestly Prayer”—tells us what his priorities were and are.

This book is not a *detailed* exposition of John 17. It is a practical study of the major themes of this profound prayer. Much of this material was given in a radio series over “Back to the Bible Broadcast” during February and March 1982. However, I have recast the entire series

since it is possible to write things in a book that may not be spoken over the air.

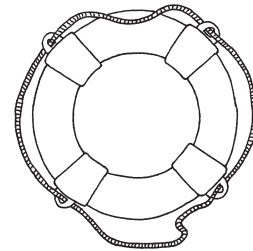
My prayer is that God will use these studies to get the church back on course. There is a price to pay, but there will be a greater price if we continue to drift.

Each of us must do his part, no matter the cost.

Warren W. Wiersbe

1

The Greatest Prayer Ever Prayed



“Some brethren pray by the yard; but true prayer is measured by weight, and not by length.”

So spoke the British Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon; *and he is right!* The greatest prayer ever prayed is recorded in John 17, and it takes about six minutes to reverently read it aloud. There is not much length, but there is certainly a great deal of depth and weight!

According to Dr. Herbert Lockyer Sr., there are 650 definite prayers recorded in the Bible; but not one of them can match our Lord's "High Priestly Prayer" in John 17—nor can any prayer recorded *outside* the Bible.

What is it about this prayer that makes it so great? Let me suggest four reasons.

1. It is great because of the person who prayed the prayer

This person is none other than Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Not only is he the Son of God, but he is God the Son, eternal God come to earth in human, but sinless, flesh.

Each of the four Gospels has its own special emphasis. Matthew emphasizes Christ the King, the Messiah promised in the Old Testament Scriptures. Mark is the Gospel of the Servant, and Luke pictures the sympathetic Son of Man. But John's purpose in writing is to present the deity of Jesus Christ. "Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and

that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:30–31).

This explains why John included this prayer in his Gospel: it magnifies the awesome truth that Jesus Christ is the eternal God. Almost every verse in John 17 expresses this great fact.

Only God the Son could ask the Father to glorify him (v. 1). Moses asked to *see* God's glory (Exodus 33:18). Jesus asked to *receive* God's glory, and he identified it as the same glory which he had with the Father "before the world was" (v. 5).

Furthermore, only God can give sinners eternal life (v. 2). And note in verse 3 that Jesus puts himself on an equal basis with God. The sinner receives eternal life when he comes to know by faith "the only true God, and Jesus Christ ..." Put anyone else's name in there and see if it makes sense. In this simple statement, Jesus claimed to be God.

Four times in this prayer, Jesus said that God the Father sent him (vv. 3, 18, 21, 25). Of course, any apostle or prophet can claim to be sent by God; but no mere human being could claim that he *came forth from God* (v. 8, and see John 16:28). Any Christian could pray, "All things that are

Mine are Thine”; but only the Son of God could add “and Thine are Mine” (v. 10). Jesus claimed to possess everything that the Father possessed! He also claimed to be *one with the Father* (vv. 11 and 21).

The very manner in which Jesus prayed reveals that he is God. He did not begin “Our Father” but simply, “Father.” *Jesus never prayed, “Our Father.”* Jesus told Mary Magdalene on that first Easter morning, “Go to My brethren and say to them, ‘I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God’” (John 20:17). God is *our* Father by grace, but He is Jesus’ Father by nature. And the word that Jesus used for “pray” (vv. 9, 15, 20) is not the common word for “pray” in the New Testament. The word means “to request *from an equal*.” You and I could not use this word because we are not equal with God. But Jesus used it three times! Why? Because he is eternal God.

In verse 24, Jesus boldly said, “Father, I will ...” (KJV). It was not a request; it was a command. Believers today cannot pray with that kind of authority. Such praying would not be faith; it would be presumption. But God the Son can

address God the Father in that manner because they are equals. *Jesus is God!*

There are other evidences of our Lord’s deity in this prayer, but we will stop with verse 24: “for You loved Me before the foundation of the world.” While it is true that God loves his people “with an everlasting love” (Jeremiah 31:3), he cannot express that love to them until they are actually existing on the earth. But the Father loved the Son from all eternity. Eternal glory and eternal love are brought together in verse 24.

If anyone else prayed in this manner and made these claims, we would conclude that he was either confused or mentally disturbed. Only Jesus Christ, God the Son, could pray this way.

But this great truth that Jesus Christ is God introduces a bit of a problem: Why would *God* pray? The Gospel records present Jesus Christ as a man of prayer. I have counted at least nineteen instances in the Gospels of Jesus praying. Is there not a contradiction here? No, because when Jesus was ministering on earth, he did *everything* in total dependence on the Father. Jesus said, “As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father ...” (John 6:57).

His works and his words come from the Father (John 5:36 and 14:24). Day by day, Jesus depended on the Father. Satan tempted Jesus to use his divine power for himself; but Jesus refused to yield (Matthew 4:1–11).

In other words, our Lord lived by faith and depended on prayer during his life and ministry on earth. Now if Jesus Christ, with all of his power and perfection, had to depend on prayer, how much more do you and I, with our multiplied imperfections and weaknesses, need to depend on prayer!

The French essayist Montaigne wrote: “There are few men who durst publish to the world the prayers they make to Almighty God.” Jesus Christ has given us this prayer, and we thank God that he did!

2. It is great because of the occasion that demanded the prayer

“That’s one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind.” If Neil Armstrong had made that statement while playing hopscotch with the neighborhood children, nobody would have paid any attention to him. But he made that

statement as he stepped from his spacecraft, as the first man to walk on the moon. The situation helped to give weight to his words.

What was our Lord’s situation and how did it relate to this prayer?

To begin with, Jesus had just finished instructing his disciples (John 13–16). Now he prayed for them, because prayer and the Word of God go together. If we have all Bible but no prayer, we may have a great deal of truth but no power. It would be “light without heat.” On the other hand, if we have all prayer but no Bible teaching, we are in danger of becoming fanatics—heat without light! Zeal is a good thing, but zeal without knowledge is usually destructive.

A proper balance of Bible study and prayer is important to a balanced Christian life. “Moreover, as for me,” said the godly prophet Samuel, “far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by ceasing to pray for you; but I will instruct you in the good and right way” (1 Samuel 12:23). Note the balance of prayer and the Word of God. “And now I commend you to God [that’s prayer] and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up ...” (Acts 20:32).

Paul knew the importance of spiritual balance, and so did the other apostles: “But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4).

The only way the Word of God can become real in our lives is through prayer and obedience. One reason we have unbalanced Christians in our churches is the lack of prayer to back up the study of God’s Word. It is much easier to get Christians to attend a Bible study than a prayer meeting, and yet we need both. Jesus *taught* his disciples, and then he *prayed* for them.

But this prayer was not only for the disciples; it was also for Jesus Christ. Remember, he was facing the cross. When our Lord began his ministry and was baptized, he prayed to the Father (Luke 3:21). Throughout his ministry, he prayed to the Father. Throughout his ministry, he depended on prayer. He arose early in the morning to pray (Mark 1:35) and even prayed all night (Luke 6:12). He prayed on the Mount of Transfiguration (Luke 9:28). Now he was praying as he faced the agony of Calvary.

The fact that Jesus prayed for himself in the first five verses of John 17 does not mean that

he prayed a selfish prayer. This is the difference. If Jesus had not prayed for the Father to glorify him and receive him back into heaven, you and I would have no salvation today. In praying for himself, he was praying for us.

Think of what it must have meant to the Savior to commune with his Father! The cup he was about to drink would come from the Father’s hand (John 18:11). There would be shame, pain, even death and temporary separation from the Father; but Jesus was not afraid. For this purpose he had come into the world, and the Father would see him through to glorious victory.

It is interesting to contrast this occasion of prayer with some of the other occasions of intercession recorded in the Scriptures. In Genesis 18 we read that Abraham interceded for the city of Sodom. But Jesus was burdened for *a whole world* and would die to save lost sinners. Moses interceded for a whole nation, the people of Israel (Exodus 32), and even offered to die that they might be forgiven. But Jesus did die! And because of his death, all who will trust him are forgiven and saved eternally. Solomon prayed

a long prayer (1,050 words in our King James Version) in his dedication of the temple; but our Lord's prayer in John 17 meant the creation of a *spiritual* temple, the church (1 Peter 2:5).

Our Lord gives us a good example here: prayer is essential, not only in the everyday affairs of life, but especially in the crises of life. "Do not pray for easy lives," said Phillips Brooks. "Pray to be stronger men. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for powers equal to your tasks."

3. It is great because of the petitions in the prayer

Prayer that asks nothing accomplishes nothing. We sing in one of our familiar hymns:

*"Thou art coming to a King,
Large petitions with thee bring.
For His grace and power are such,
None can ever ask too much."*

John Newton

If ever there was a "kingly prayer," it is this one recorded in John 17. While the outline of the

prayer is simple, the petitions in the prayer are profound. The prayer may be outlined as follows:

- Jesus prayed for himself (vv. 1–5)
- Jesus prayed for his disciples (vv. 6–19)
 - Their security (vv. 6–12)
 - Their sanctity (vv. 13–19)
- Jesus prayed for the whole church (vv. 20–26)

The petitions in this prayer take us back to eternity past (v. 5) and forward into future glory in heaven (v. 24). This prayer deals with the glory of the Father and the Son (v. 1) as well as the church glorifying God on earth (v. 10). Our Lord mentions the Father's love for him (v. 24) as well as the Father's love for believers (v. 23).

Four words summarize the main requests in this prayer: glory, security, sanctity, and unity.

In verses 1–5, Jesus requested that the Father give to him the *glory* that he veiled when he (Jesus) came to earth. If God had not answered this request, none of the other requests could have been answered.

In the next section of the prayer (vv. 6–19), our Lord prayed for the disciples. He had two major concerns: their *security* (vv. 6–12: “Keep them”) and their *sanctity* (vv. 13–19: “Sanctify them”). The disciples were the “pioneers” in world evangelism (v. 18) and needed all the prayer support they could get!

The final section emphasizes the whole church (vv. 20–26), and the main request is that God’s people might experience *unity*: “That they may all be one ...” (v. 21).

These four requests—God’s glory, and the security, sanctity, and unity of God’s church—are good guidelines to follow in our own prayer life. Too much of our praying is shallow and selfish. Keeping these requests in mind could help us to deepen our own praying.

As you study this prayer, you will discover that Jesus Christ has given us three wonderful gifts. He has given us eternal life (v. 2), God’s Word (vv. 8 and 14), and God’s glory (v. 22). Because we have eternal life, we have *salvation*. The Word of God makes possible our *sanctification* (note v. 17), and our *glorification* is sure because he has already given us his

glory. The believer’s past, present, and future are secure!

An evangelist friend of mine told me about a teenager who wrecked the family car and stood by the wreckage praying, “O Lord, may this accident not have happened!” What a foolish prayer! Yet you and I have perhaps prayed some silly, shallow prayers. It is only as we grow in our knowledge of the Word of God that we can deepen our prayer life. It is when we test our requests by the Word of God that we discover how to pray in the will of God.

4. It is great because of the victory it can give us today

A friend of mine wrote a thesis on the prayer of Solomon when he dedicated the temple. It is a marvelous prayer, but not a great deal in that prayer is applicable to New Testament believers today. Jesus prayed this prayer in John 17 so that his disciples could hear him (v. 13). What he prayed about relates to us today.

Jesus closed his upper room teaching with these words: “In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world”

(John 16:33). In his prayer, Jesus used the word “world” nineteen times! The prayer recorded in John 17 tells us how we can overcome the world. Let’s put these two key verses together so we can get the full impact of what our Lord said:

In the world you	... these things I speak
have tribulation but	in this world so that
take courage; I have	they may have My joy
overcome the world	made full in themselves.

What we learn from his prayer gives us the courage to overcome the world, and the joy of this victory fills and controls our lives!

The word “world” is used in several different senses in Scripture. Sometimes it means “the created universe,” as in John 17:5: “before the world was.” Sometimes the word simply means “people, humanity,” as in John 3:16: “For God so loved the world ...” But often the word “world” goes beyond creation and humanity and means “society organized without God and against God.” When Jesus prayed, “they [the disciples] are not of the world, even as I am not of the world (v. 14), he was using “world” in this sense.

Theologians call this the “ethical use” of the word “world.”

“The world” is the system of things that you and I used to belong to before we were saved. We lived “according to the course of this world” (Ephesians 2:2). Our standards were the standards of this world, and our pleasures and satisfaction came from this world. When we trusted Jesus Christ as Savior, we received citizenship in heaven (Philippians 3:20–21) so that we no longer belong to this world system. We are in this world physically, but we do not belong to this world spiritually. Like a diver on the ocean floor we are out of our element, but we are able to survive because we have outside help.

What are the characteristics of this world system from which we have been delivered, yet against which we must constantly battle?

For one thing, we live in a *deceived* world. The world does not know God. In spite of all the world’s wisdom, it cannot find God. (Read John 17:25 and 1 Corinthians 1:18–31.) As far as the world is concerned, “one religion is just as good as another.” The world is willing to accept the cross as a “religious symbol,” but it

has no concept of the person of the cross, or the purpose and power of the cross. “For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing ...” (1 Corinthians 1:18).

The world is deceived because Satan, the prince of this world, deceives the mind and darkens the heart (2 Corinthians 4:3–6; also see John 12:31; 14:30; and 16:11). “We know that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19). Satan is a counterfeiter who provides religious substitutes for those who do not know Jesus Christ. “It makes no difference what you believe,” says the world, “just so long as you believe something!”

In contrast to the deception that controls people in the world system, the believer has received the gift of eternal life, and he therefore shares in *reality*. “And this is life eternal,” prayed Jesus, “that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (v. 3). *The only true God!* And because we know the only true God, and his Son Jesus Christ, we do not need the substitutes that so excite the world. Our joy is found only in that which comes from the heart of the Father.

The world system is not only deceived, but it is also *dangerous*. “The world is passing away ...” (1 John 2:17); “the form of this world is passing away” (1 Corinthians 7:31). The people who are caught in the world system think it is safe, solid, enduring, and dependable, when in reality the world is temporary and passing. People say, “It’s as sure as the world!” But nothing could be more *unsure* than this world system. (For that matter, the *created* world is not that sure. “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away,” Matthew 24:35.)

Because the world is deceptive, it is dangerous. The world can even deceive God’s own people and lead them into trouble. “Do not love the world, nor the things in the world,” warned the apostle John (1 John 2:15). “And do not be conformed to this world,” wrote the apostle Paul (Romans 12:2). James asked the pertinent question, “Do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God?” (James 4:4). “Make every effort to come to me soon,” Paul wrote to Timothy, “for Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me ...” (2 Timothy 4:9–10).

Satan is the prince of the world. He has declared war on God’s people. “Be of sober spirit, be on the alert,” Peter wrote. “Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). Lions are dangerous! Satan will use the world to entice the believer out of the will of God.¹

We not only live in a deceived and dangerous world, but we live in a *defiled* world. The believer must be careful to keep himself “unstained by the world” (James 1:27). The new nature that we have within creates new desires and new appetites, but there are always around us the temptations to lower things. Because of this new nature, believers have “escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust” (2 Peter 1:4), but they can still be tempted and they can still fail.

It is getting more and more difficult for us to keep ourselves “unstained by the world.” We are invaded by the messengers of “the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life” (1 John 2:16). Whether the advertisers are promoting automobiles or artichokes, they

¹ For a study of Satan and his tactics, see my book *The Strategy of Satan* published by Tyndale House (1979).

seem to need the help of sex and pride to get their message across. Seductively dressed models who know nothing about the product try to woo us into making a purchase. Or perhaps it is the handsome businessman (obviously wealthy) who tries to inflate our ego and win us over. Stephen Leacock once described advertising as “the science of arresting the human intelligence long enough to get money from it.”

Finally, this present world is a *divided* world. Satan’s purpose is to divide and conquer, and he seems to be succeeding. Even the saints have a hard time getting along with each other! We put labels on each other (“liberal,” “fundamentalist,” “neo-evangelical,” “militant fundamentalist,” “neo-fundamentalist,” and so on) and think that our labels solve problems. Usually they create more problems, because most maturing Christians don’t remain in the same pigeon-hole very long, and some are difficult to categorize. We spend more time with the labels than we do with the people we are identifying!

Here, then, are four characteristics of the world we live in: it is a deceived world, a

dangerous world, a defiled world, and a divided world. One of the messages of John 17 is how to overcome the world. Let's see what this prayer has to say to us about the world that we live in.

We live in a deceived world, but in Jesus Christ we have *reality*. We know and trust the “only true God.” The gift of eternal life has put us in touch with reality. Our Lord mentioned this truth in verses 1–5. The better we know God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, the less interest we will have in the transient toys of the world system. “If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15). It is our love for the Father that fills our life with spiritual reality.

We live in a dangerous world, but we are secure in Jesus Christ (vv. 6–12). Because he has manifested God's name to us (and this means God's nature, God's character), we are not afraid. “The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous runs into it and is safe” (Proverbs 18:10). Jesus prayed, “Holy Father, keep them in Your name ...” (v. 11).

We live in a defiled world, but it is possible to keep pure because of our relationship to Jesus Christ. In verses 13–19, our Lord prayed for our

sanctification. He gave us the light of his Word to enable us to walk in the way of holiness. “Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth” (v. 17).

We live in a divided world, but in Jesus Christ we who are saved have spiritual unity (vv. 20–26). To enable us to preserve and promote this unity, he gave us the gift of his glory (v. 22). We do not need to manufacture spiritual unity: the unity is already there and all we must do is maintain it.

Perhaps a summary chart would make these truths more clear.

The world we live in	God's provision in Jesus Christ
A deceived world	The gift of eternal life (vv. 1–5): We have reality.
A dangerous world	The revelation of God's name (vv. 6–12): We have security.
A defiled world	The gift of the Word (vv. 13–19): We have sanctity.
A divided world	The gift of God's glory (vv. 20–26): We have unity.

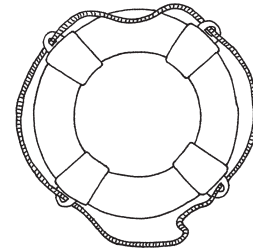
The famous American preacher Henry Ward Beecher once said, “It is not well for a man to

pray cream and live skim milk.” The important thing about our study of John 17 is that it makes a difference in our daily lives. One of the tests of whether or not we are personally benefitting from this study is, “What is my attitude toward the world?” As we study, we must take inventory of our lives. Are we being deceived by something in the world and thus being robbed of the reality in Christ? Are we putting ourselves into a place of danger that could ruin our testimony, our work, our home? Are we secretly being defiled by the world? Are we creating unbiblical divisions instead of encouraging spiritual unity?

After all, we are not blessed for our studying of the Word, but for our *doing* of the Word.

“But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it ... this man will be blessed in what he does” (James 1:25).

Prayer: Basic Training



These things Jesus spoke; and lifting up His eyes to heaven, He said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You.”

John 17:1

“Lord, teach us to pray!”

This request from one of the disciples (Luke 11:1) gave evidence of real spiritual insight. We must learn how to pray. While