

Sermon Series:

Prayers of the Bible



JESUS' PASTORAL PRAYER – John 17

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Today we are starting a new series looking at some of the prayers of the Bible. If we want to learn how to paint a picture, it helps to look at other paintings and even watch an accomplished painter at work. If we want to learn how to play cricket, it helps to watch a test match to see how those at the top of their game play. If I want to learn a new sewing technique, I watch someone do it on a YouTube video. In the same way, if we want to learn how to pray, it is helpful to read and study the prayers that God has included in His Word. And that is what we will be doing.

Today, we also start our journey to the cross with Jesus by looking at two prayers he prayed on the night before his death. That evening started with Jesus and his disciples gathering in an upper room to celebrate the Passover feast together. When they arrived, Jesus shocked them all by washing their feet to show them how they should serve each other. Then, as part of the Passover meal, Jesus instituted what we know as Communion, a remembrance of His death and resurrection for us. John's gospel then records several chapters of His final words to the disciples as He teaches them about the Holy Spirit, about the need for them to love each other and the importance of abiding in Him. John concludes this time with Jesus' prayer for His current disciples, and all who would come after them.

Jesus and His disciples then move to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus goes off on His own to pray to his Father to prepare for his approaching death. When he returns, He is met by Judas and the temple guard who have come to arrest Jesus and take Him to the religious rulers.

This week we will look at Jesus' prayer for His disciples. It is sometimes called His high priestly prayer – Jesus is interceding as a priest on behalf of His people. However, I think it is more like the Good Shepherd praying for His sheep whom he knows will soon be scattered by His arrest and death. (John 16:32,33) He knows they will face some hard times and He is asking His Father to care for them as He leaves them. This is why I have called it Jesus' Pastoral Prayer.

Introduction – God’s glory

Before we move on to look at Jesus’ requests for His people, we need to look for a moment at a significant word Jesus will use in this prayer – glory. The prayer starts with this concept.

Glorify your Son so he can give glory back to you ... I brought glory to you here on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. Now, Father, bring me into the glory we shared before the world began. (v. 1,4)

So, what does “glory mean? It is quite an abstract term and when I thought about it, I found it difficult to come up with a standard definition which fit in the different places it is used. After studying it a bit, I think there are two ways it is used when talking about God.

Sometimes, it refers to the visible sign of God’s presence – often manifesting itself as a bright shining light. For instance, we see the pillar of cloud and fire that rests on the tabernacle in the wilderness and the temple in Jerusalem. In the prophets’ visions of the throne room of God, He is surrounded by an overwhelming brightness that is sometimes likened to the glitter of diamonds. When Jesus’ birth was announced to the shepherds, we are told that “the glory of the Lord shone around them” (Luke 2:9). In describing Jesus’ transfiguration, we are told that His “face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as light”. (Matthew 17:2) The presence of bright light is a physical way to represent God’s purity and power. It re-enforces the idea that God is so great that we cannot even look at Him without hurting ourselves because He is so much greater than our human capability to comprehend.

The physical light emphasizes that God is great, but it doesn’t give us any details about His greatness, does it? The details of God’s glory can be seen in His actions which reveal his character – His love, justice, power, compassion, grace, wisdom, etc. God’s actions show us all the many ways that God is perfect in all He is and does. One writer has called God’s glory the “plenitude of His perfections”.

We can see God’s perfection in His dealings with Israel as we see His long-suffering love and His righteous judgement, His generous provision and His wise guidance for life. However, God’s glory is seen most fully in Jesus. The New Testament writers tell us:

The Son radiates God’s own glory and expresses the very character of God... (Hebrews 1:3)

“... the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ.” (2 Corinthians 4:6)

This doesn’t mean that Jesus walked around with a glowing face! However, when people watched what He did and listened to what He said, they caught a glimpse of God’s glory. In the mundane and in the miraculous, Jesus showed God’s glorious perfection in ways it had never been seen before. An important outcome of Jesus’ demonstration of God’s glory is eternal life.

He (Jesus) gives eternal life to each one you (Father) have given to him. And this is eternal life – to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, the one you sent to the earth. (v. 2,3)

This is not talking about everlasting life or living forever with God. This is talking about experiencing a kind of life – God’s eternal life – which comes from knowing and experiencing Him in all His glory.

When I think of God’s glory, I think of what it is like to be driving up a mountain road, surrounded by trees. You can’t see much beyond the road, but you know you are slowly climbing the mountain. All of a sudden, one side of the road drops away in a cliff which allows you to catch a magnificent view of the valley, mountains, sky and you are left without words at its beauty. All you can say is “Oh, WOW!”

What do people say when they see God’s glory? “Oh, WOW!” It may be in an overwhelming physical glowing brightness, or it may be through the demonstration of His perfect character through His actions. Both stop us in our tracks and force us to worship our great God.

As Jesus begins this prayer, He knows the greatest demonstration of His Father’s glory will be seen in the events of the next three or four days. His death and resurrection will show God’s justice and love, His grace and wisdom, His compassion and power. Jesus’ starts His prayer asking that God’s glory will shine through all that happens – that His sacrificial death and triumphant resurrection will demonstrate God’s “plenitude of perfections”.

Jesus knows the coming days will be a glorious demonstration of God’s character, but they will also turn His disciples’ world upside down. Nothing will ever be the same and so He asks His Father to be active in their lives. He builds His requests around three relationships, starting with our relationship with God.

Relationship with God (v. 6-10)

I have revealed you to the ones you gave me from this world. They were always yours. You gave them to me and they have kept your word. (v. 6)

There are a couple of things to notice in Jesus’ words. First, as we’ve already seen, Jesus showed people what God was like through all He said and did. We can only really know God as He reveals himself to us and this happens most fully through Jesus.

Secondly, Jesus talks about how his disciples came into a relationship with God. And we see two sides to this process. On the one hand, the Father gave Jesus his disciples. This indicates that God chose them out of the world to be His people. On the other hand, they had to respond. Out of their own free choice, they “*kept his word*”. A few verses later we read:

They accepted it (Jesus’ revelation) and know that I came from you, and they believe you sent me. (v. 8)

There are many debates on what is paramount, God’s choosing us or our response of belief. I think these verses indicate that both are in play. God chooses us and we must respond to Him in belief. Our belief affirms that God has chosen us; His choosing affirms our belief. And the end result of this relationship?

All who are mine belong to you, and you have given them to me, and they bring me glory. (v. 10)

The outward evidence of this relationship is that we will begin to also show God character how we live and display His glory. People looking at us will catch a glimpse of God and His glory. Amazing!

Relationship with the world (v. 11-19)

Jesus' time in the world is coming to an end. His work here will be done with His death and resurrection and He will be returning to the Father. Does that mean that Jesus will ask His Father to take His people out of the world as well? No.

I am not asking you to take them out of the world ... Just as you sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world. (v. 15,18)

The Father sent Jesus into the world to display His glory and now, Jesus is sending His people into the world to carry on this work of displaying God's glory. But this will not be an easy task. Just like Jesus, they will experience spiritual attack from Satan who will seek to destroy them and their witness. Jesus asks the Father:

... protect them by the power of your name ... keep them safe from the evil one. (v. 11,15)

Satan, the evil one, will do all he can to destroy us and destroy our witness to the glory of God. He will seek to compromise our witness as we suffer difficulties in our lives and are tempted by the world around us. He will seek to disrupt our relationship with God and get us to doubt God's love for us. In short, He will do anything He can to pull us away from God. We must realise this and take it seriously.

But we are not alone in this battle. Jesus continues His intercession for us:

Make them holy (set apart) by your truth; teach them your word, which is truth. I give myself as a holy sacrifice for them so that they can be made holy by your truth. (v. 17,19)

To be holy means to be set apart from the world and to be set apart to Him. He does this in two ways. He teaches us His Word. His Word shines a light on our lives and shows us the right way to live. It raises our sights from the world around us and focuses on Him and His perfection. It helps us to resist temptation. And secondly, He gave His life to break the power of sin in our lives. We may be tempted to sin, but we are not enslaved to sin. By the power of His resurrection life in us, we can say no to sin and see the work of the evil one for what it is and resist Him.

We are in the world, surrounded by its brokenness. But we are in the world as God's people, under His protection and guided by His Word. This world is not our final reality. God's glory is.

Relationship with each other (v. 20-26)

I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one – as you are in me, Father, and I am in you (v. 21)

Earlier in the evening, Jesus had told the disciples that they were to love one another as He has loved them. That is a lot to ask when you think of the greatness of Jesus' love for us!

Now he is praying that they will be made one in the same way that He and the Father are one. I find it very hard to imagine this kind of oneness. When you think of the loving union of the Trinity for all eternity – how can we ever experience that kind of unity here on earth? Too often I have experienced just the opposite! However, Jesus doesn't leave us to struggle along on our own with this.

I have given them the glory you gave me, so they may be one as we are one. (v. 22)

What is God's glory? It is His character, a part of which is His love. Jesus has given us His love and it is this love that we are to have for each other. Jesus' life in us makes it possible for us to live like Him, displaying God's glory.

I am in them and you are in me. May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me. (v. 23)

God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have invited us into their sphere of love. They love us as much as they love one another! What an amazing thought it that! This can't help but affect our relationships with each other. And this will be a witness to the watching world around us and give them a glimpse of God's glory.

And one day ... one day we will see God's glory in all its splendour.

I want these whom you have given me to be with me where I am. Then they can see all the glory you gave me because you loved me even before the world began! (v. 24)

Now, that's something I am looking forward to!

How should we pray?

This is Jesus' prayer for us. There is so much more in these verses than what I can cover this morning. But I think we've looked at enough to give us plenty to think about this coming week!

As we think back on what we have seen here, I am encouraged by how Jesus prays for me. He knows what it is like to live in this world, and He knows how to pray for me and for us as a gathering of His people. And he promises to give us all that we need to display God's glory to the world.

The other thing I gain by looking at Jesus' prayer is some idea of how we should be praying for each other. I think, based on Jesus' example, we should pray that we will increasingly:

1. Know, believe, and keep God's Word. This is the light to guide us and keep us on the right path.
2. Be set apart and protected as we live as God's people in this world. It is easy for us to be sucked into the world around us and lose our way. But with God's power, it is possible to be holy to Him.
3. Become united as one in God's love. As His love fills us, we will be enabled to love one another.

We will not become perfect in any of these areas overnight! We will fail and fall short of this standard. But a part of God's glorious character is that He loves us anyway! When we fall, He picks us up, brushes us off and puts us back on the right track again. Even our failures

can point others to God's glory. He wants us to succeed. He wants us to grow to be more like Him. He will do all that is necessary for us to become more like Him.

And why is this all important? So that we will display God's glory to the world around us. Wouldn't it be wonderful if, as people observe our lives – as individuals and as a community of His people, they couldn't help but say, "Oh, WOW!"