

The Gift of Life by the Sacrifice of Christ (Jn 17.2)

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Introduction

A goal we have in communion is to remember the Lord Jesus in a distinct way. He told us to partake in remembrance of Him, to exercise covenant remembering, and to “proclaim His death until He comes.”²³ **For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread,**²⁴ **and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."**²⁵ **In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."**²⁶ **For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes** (1 Cor 11.23-26). If we connect the notions of remembering, covenant, and proclaiming, then we know that explanatory preaching with an emphasis on our Lord's person and work is the core of communion. This is how there can be remembrance and covenant proclamation going on at the same time that we eat and drink. Remembering His person and proclaiming His work are part of the same whole. They are opposite sides of the same fabric. Thus, we remember by reflecting on preaching. Eating and drinking take place in the context of preaching. The main emphasis, therefore, is not on our duties (such as the duty of God-minded discipleship or the duty of self-denial). Duties like these may flow from communion remembering (they do flow from it), but they are not the focus. The focus is the person and work of Christ set forth in preaching in a distinct way.

In this light, we return to John's remembering on record in chapter 17 of his Gospel. Here we have reminders about Christ as our great high priest. Today, our attention for preaching communion remembrances will be on verse 2. Emphasis in this verse is on the life-giving work of Christ in priestly intercession; hence, the title: “The Gift of Life by the Sacrifice of Christ” (or, if we invert the ideas we have, “The Death of Death by the Death of Christ”).

When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, ² since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. ³ And this is eternal life that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent (Jn 17.1-3).

We can hang the details of the text on two hooks. 1) Jesus, our high priest presents Himself as a sacrifice, and 2) our high priest petitions acceptance of His sacrifice. It will become evident as we go along that this prayer is communion with God at the same time that it is intercession for sinners, and instruction for all of us who hear it (thank the Lord for His example of audible prayer).

1A. Our high priest presents Himself as a sacrifice

Jesus presents Himself to the Father as a mediatorial offering (1 Tim 2.5, **there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus**). He offers Himself to the cross, not only to be the intercessor for sinners, but also to be the intercessory *offering* itself by *His suffering and death*.

Interestingly, the idea that a priestly sacrifice is in view in this passage is not a common interpretation among readers and commentators. Let us consider why they do not see high priestly intercession here and then why they *should* see it in the passage.

Here are some of the main reasons that lead people to conclude that this prayer is not the high priestly prayer of Christ. First, they say that this characterization is not in the text. Instead, what we have in substance is a farewell prayer (Ridderbos, *John*, 546). Although Jesus intercedes for the preservation and sanctification of His people, the text (according to this view)

does not indicate priestly intercession or sacrificial intercession. In reformed circles, this outlook goes hand in hand with softening, and even denying, the historical claim that John 17 teaches efficacious atonement (somewhat mislabeled as limited atonement). If sacrifice is not here, then efficacious atonement is not here. Second, some say that calling this the high priestly prayer may have some value (because of vs. 5, 19 and the fact of mediation that indicate priestly work). However, they stress a) sacrificial language is not strong and b) high priestly intercession is a post-ascension work of Christ. Thus, they give a generic title, namely, "The Prayer of Jesus" (Carson, *John*, 553). Third, some call it the prayer of consecration and they avoid the idea of absolute predestination in the text on the basis that Jesus intercedes for people who perish. Judas is the prime example per 17.12 (Bruce, *John*, 329). These different views lead to a question.

How much credit should we give to the fact that unlike the book of Hebrews, this text does not speak *explicitly* of Jesus as a priest or of His work as a sacrifice? With that question in mind, let us consider why we *should* conclude that this *is* the high priestly prayer of Christ on behalf of sinners in desperate need (premise: they are slaves of sin and bound for eternal death).

We can begin in a general way by saying that there is an elephant in the room, and these writers are not seeing it. The elephant in the room is the fact that Jesus presents Himself to the fearful hour of the cross. He presents Himself to the Father in presenting Himself to the hour that has now come. It is the hour that involves the paradox of humiliation and glory for He prays for glorification by means of the hour of suffering (17.1c, "**Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you**"). In other words, "I submit myself to this hour as the way to glory."

Therefore, the idea of sacrifice derives from the reference to the hour that has come. Some background passages on the coming of the hour and its arrival confirm that priestly *sacrifice* is a vital component of our Lord's intercession (inclusive of but more than consecration). It is vital that we spend some time to make this point stick.

1) First on the coming of the hour

The coming hour is in view from the beginning. It is in the account of the wine miracle in John 2: ***My hour has not yet come.... After this... Jesus went up to Jerusalem...In the temple... Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."*** ²⁰ The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" ²¹ ***But he was speaking about the temple of his body....*** (4-21).

Note how Jesus, again in the temple, indicates that this distinctive hour was "not yet": ***These words he spoke in the treasury, as he taught in the temple; but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.*** ²¹ So he said to them again, "***I am going away, and you will seek me, and you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come***" (Jn 8.20-21). His going away is clearly His departure as the redemptive accomplishment that Moses and Elijah spoke of on the mount of transfiguration (Lk 9.30-31).

2) Now, notice the passages that stress the arrival of this hour

In John 12:23, the description of the hour parallels its description in John 17. It is the hour of glory. Moreover, the glory is by death in order to gain much fruit: ***And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.*** ²⁴ ***Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*** Then the paradox of glory hits the high chord of extreme tension when Jesus says, "***Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour!' But for this purpose I have come to this hour.*** ²⁸ ***Father, glorify your name!***" Remember, at the same time that Jesus recoils from the cross, He commits Himself with determined resolve to experience it. He speaks ambivalently, in effect, saying, "My soul is exceedingly troubled, and what shall I say? With every ounce of self-preservation in my being, I must say, 'Father, save me from this hour!' Nevertheless, with determined resolve rooted deep in my soul, I must say, 'Father, glorify your son in and through the unspeakable suffering of the cross.'"

This is the hour that Jesus said is coming and has come: ***Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me*** (Jn 16.32).

In Matthew 26, Jesus spoke of this hour as His time, and He linked it with the Passover: He said, "Go into the city to a certain man and say to him, 'The Teacher says, *My time is at hand. I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples*'" (v. 18). Shortly thereafter, Jesus instituted the Christian Passover of communion that links His death with the sacrificial lamb of the Passover:

Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ² During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, ³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, ⁴ rose from supper (Jn 13.1-4).

In the context of the transformation of Passover into communion, Jesus said, ***this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins*** (Mat 26.28).

The linkage with the Passover brings into view the inseparability of the hour of glory, the cross, departure, accomplishment; love, communion, and thus Passover sacrifice for many for the forgiveness of sins. The "hour" informs us that the climax of His redemptive work has come. Wicked hands will take the true Passover Lamb and slay Him while His disciples run from His side in fear ("friends through fear, his cause disowning"). The shadow of the cross looms large. The dark clouds of Golgotha's hill are quickly forming. The stage is set; the hour of *sacrifice* has arrived.

Granted, in John 17, we have no explicit language that uses the words, priest, high priest, sacrifice, substitution, or even redemption. Still, the fact that Jesus presents Himself to the cross as Passover lamb to die in order to bear much fruit shows that high priestly intercessory sacrifice is obviously in view. Again, the hour of sacrifice on the cross is the elephant in the room that we all too often fail to see. If we see it, we must conclude that Jesus *offers* Himself to die on the cross as a *sacrifice* for sinners. This is high priestly work; this must be high priestly intercession.

2A. Our high priest petitions acceptance of His sacrifice

We get this idea of petitioning acceptance of His sacrifice from verse two; particularly from the way verse two connects with verse one. Note the language of close connection in the word "since": "***Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, ² since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him*** (17.1b-2). Jesus states the cause, basis, and ground on which He seeks acceptance of His sacrifice.

The basis He pleads for the Father to grant Him glory in and through the humiliation of the cross is the authority the Father gave Him. He presents Himself to the cross (v.1b) in harmony with this gift of authority from the Father (v.2). In other words, He petitions acceptance of His sacrifice based on the authority God gave Him in the eternal covenant of redemption.

This is another overlooked elephant in the room because the commentators typically make no mention of the covenant of redemption in their expositions of this passage (i.e., Ridderbos, Carson, and Bruce). Nevertheless, we can easily see that the Father and Son made an agreement that brought Jesus from heaven to this earth on a mission. Note the work the Father gave Jesus to do on earth (17.4). They planned and agreed on that work before the creation of the world (17.5). Now, they are bringing it to realization in human history in a special way in the paradoxical hour of the cross.

Specifically in verse 2, Jesus gives us insight into this covenantal relationship by focusing on the authority that God gave Him as Sabbath king and redeemer of the Father's elect. Because

of this gift to Him, Jesus came into the world to do the will of God by the *sacrifice* of His very body. The writer of Hebrews says it like this: **Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; ⁶ in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. ⁷ Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.'" ⁸ When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), ⁹ then he added, "Behold, I have come to do your will." He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. ¹⁰ And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. ¹¹ And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God_ (Heb 10.5-12). God gave Jesus supreme authority in covenant before He came into the world; He exercises that authority in specific ways. Now, we should consider the description of this authority and its exercise; it is like a tightly packed suitcase.**

1B. His authority is comprehensive (**since you have given him authority over all flesh, 17.2a**)

He is Sabbath king prospectively. This is a reference to His authority over all things that He receives by resurrection enthronement. Here, the focus is on His absolute authority over every human being from Adam to the end of time. He does not exercise this authority until God makes Him Lord by the resurrection. (cf. Acts 2.36, **This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are ³³ Being therefore witnesses. exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. ³⁴ For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, "' The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, ³⁵ until I make your enemies your footstool.'** ³⁶ Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that **God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."**). Still, the Father gave Him this authority *as promise and guarantee*. This brings us to the other description of His authority. He has this universal, comprehensive, and sovereign authority over every human being for a very specific purpose: to give life.

2B. His authority is life giving

That is, because He has this sovereign authority, He is the giver of life. Thus, His giving of life is particular and permanent (we have to do more unpacking from the suitcase).

1) His life giving is particular

The scope here is particular not universal. That fact could not be made plainer than by affirming the purpose of His universal sovereignty, specifically, that He has this Lordship over every human being for the precise purpose of giving eternal life to the Father's elect people: **you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him (17.2)**. God gave particular people from the fallen human family to the Lord Jesus. The design is that Jesus will give them eternal life by means of His sacrifice on the cross. Thus, Jesus pleads acceptance of His sacrifice based on this covenantal design. Jesus is in the process of fulfilling that eternal covenant to secure eternal redemption by blood (Heb 9.12), by the blood of the eternal covenant (Heb 13.20). Accordingly, He offers Himself as the sacrifice for specific sinners in the great high priestly prayer. Having universal authority, Jesus goes to the cross for the particular purpose of saving a particular people. Before they were born, before Jesus came into the world, these particular people were His brothers and sisters by covenant; they were His sheep by God's gift. Before He came into the world and before the Spirit saved any of them (before any of them became children of God by faith), they were already His covenant children. Hebrews 2 makes this point emphatically:

For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one origin. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers, ¹² saying, "I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise." ¹³ And again, "I will put my trust in him." And again, "Behold, I and the children God has given me." ¹⁴ Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵ and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. ¹⁶ For surely it is not angels that he helps, but

he helps the offspring of Abraham. ¹⁷ *Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people* (Heb 2.11-17).

The explicit language of Hebrews is simply the “large plant” form of the gospel Jesus gave us in seed form (cf. Mat 13.31-32).

2) His life giving is permanent

By means of an agreement between Jesus and the Father, Jesus received the appointment of Sabbath Lordship or universal sovereignty over all flesh in order to give His life on the cross for particular lost sinners. In harmony with that agreement that goes back before the creation of the world, Jesus presented Himself as an offering for sin to secure the death of death for those the Father gave Him. By the death of death in His death on the cross in their place, Jesus secured the gift of eternal life for the Father’s elect. That is why we speak of the redemption He obtained as “eternal redemption” (Heb 9.12). Salvation in Christ is deliverance from slavery to sin and eternal death. Jesus loved His covenant children with an everlasting love. Therefore, as Sabbath Lord, He gives them everlasting life.

This is a marvelous way to remember our covenant Lord and to proclaim His saving death until we arrive at the high noon of His coming. Along the way we have His promise: if you believe in me, then if you die physically, you will live, because by faith in me you will never die! (Jn 11.25-26)

To our Sabbath king be all glory now and forevermore, amen!

What then shall we say to these things?

I need Him. I need the sacrifice that He offered for sinners. I acknowledge my sin the merits for me only eternal death. O Lord, Jesus I need you.

I own Him as my very own. As concretely as I take this bread and wine to my palate, likewise I take Christ to be my priest, prophet, and king. I cling to Him for forgiveness of sin, to Him and to His work alone for nothing I could ever do can gain an ounce of God’s favor. I commit myself to learn from Him by open-minded and openhearted study of His word. I commit myself to obey the Lord Jesus in all things for He is universal Sabbath Lord. O Lord Jesus, I own you as my great high priest and Sabbath king. Say the word Lord, and I will do it.

I own His family as my brothers and sisters. We are one loaf and therefore we are to conduct ourselves as one loaf. Peter says it like this: “**having purified your souls by our obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart**” (1 Pet 1.22). Why did God save me? He saved me for a sincere brotherly love; therefore, I am to be what I am and find ways to show kindness, forgiveness, respect, and many good deeds of love to the Christian family. O Lord Jesus, I own your gathering of sinners, your brothers and sisters, as my family to love.