

Introduction

John 17 is part of the record of how the apostle John remembers the Lord Jesus. He remembers and He causes us to remember who Jesus is by giving us an account of what Jesus said and what He did. In this passage, we have a special glimpse at what Jesus said to the Father in the high priestly prayer in the very shadow of the cross. This is the hour of marvelous glory; it comes by unparalleled suffering. As I read 17.1-5, take note of the last two verses that reveal Jesus as “The Covenantally Obedient Son of God.”

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. ⁴ I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. ⁵ And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed (Jn 17.1-5).

If you think carefully about this title (“The Covenantally Obedient Son of God”), you have to wonder about combining “obedient” with “Son of God” because Son of God is a designation of the second person of the triune God. In other words, to be blunt, the title could be “the obedient God.” The difficulty is combining the idea of obedience with God; this is far more difficult than combining oil and water. We say that oil and water do not mix; they do not go together. Even if you put them in the same container, the oil, as it were, separates itself and floats to the top. They may be in the same container, but they clearly do not go together in some unified way. Likewise, how can we put obedience and God together in the same container of thought? Are they not separate things to such a degree that they do not, they flat out *cannot*, combine to make a unified whole. For short, obedience is not a property of God, just as humility is not a property of God because these things imply someone greater and there is no one greater than God is. God is the greatest and best of beings.

Thus, how can Jesus be God and obedient at the same time? The answer is in the rest of the title: He is “covenantally” obedient. The passage forces us to think about the covenant or agreement between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that we call the covenant of redemption (the Latin is *pactum salutis*, the covenant of salvation). There are a number of references to the *pactum salutis* in this chapter, direct and indirect, that serve as context for understanding who Jesus is. I will accent these references (cf. the underlining below):

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.

⁴ I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do.

⁵ And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.

⁶ "I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.

⁷ Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you.

⁸ For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.

⁹ I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours.

¹¹ And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.

¹² While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled.

¹⁴ I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.

¹⁶ They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.

¹⁸ As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.

²¹ that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

²² The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one,

²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

²⁴ Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

²⁵ O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me.

²⁶ I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

References to the covenant of salvation that the members of the trinity made before the creation of the world are here in almost every sentence of the prayer. Jesus says, "you sent me, I am not of the world, but you sent me into the world, you gave me a saving authority to give eternal life to a people that you gave me, you loved me before the foundation of the world, and you gave me a *work to do*" (v. 4).

Now we could center our attention on the work God gave Jesus to do, namely, that it has a covenantal origin, it is certain in its accomplishment, it is God-centered, and so forth. However, if we seek to remember the Lord Jesus in a distinct way, we will center our attention not on the work God gave Jesus to do, but on Jesus who did the work. In other words, we will emphasize His covenantal obedience that this text tells us is the obedience of God (Jesus is the obedient Son of God). We have astounding words here that show us that the gospel at its core is something "out of this world"; it is something from above and beyond this world. The gospel involves the coming of God in human flesh for covenant obedience in order to save sinners. In this light, let us do what the writer of Hebrews tells us to do, "**Consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, who was faithful to him who appointed him**" (3.1-2). Fulfilling the covenant, Jesus is obedient. This is broad brush. He presents no details. He simply mentions "the work." If we think about Him in terms of His work, we can remember Him as willing, faithful, and self-sacrificing in His obedience.

1A. He is willing in His obedience

He agreed to the work. The entire pact, the *pactum salutis* is not something that the triune God had to do; it is something that God chose to do. Jesus voluntarily committed Himself to this mission. The Father gave Him this work. He calls it **the work that you gave me to do**. As the writer of Hebrews says it, the Father **appointed him** as apostle and high priest. By the Father's appointment, Jesus has the role of sent one (apostle) and mediator between God and lost sinners (high priest).

This is an amazing point. Jesus directs our attention back to the eternal covenant. In that covenant, the Father gave Jesus authority over all flesh. It was a promise. It is prospective, referring to the authority over all flesh that the Father agreed to give to Jesus for His obedience in going to the cross. He promised Him this authority over all flesh for His work on the cross in order to fulfill the specific purpose of giving eternal life to His covenant children. By the cross, He would receive authority over all humanity to give eternal life to the specific people the Father gave Him (1-3).

Now, in verse 4, Jesus says that the appointment to the hour of the cross is *a work*. Who does the work assigned by another? The servant does the work of His master. The Father assigned Jesus a work to do. Jesus was willing to do the work.

Jesus was willing to do the dirty work of redemption (cf. Heb 10.5-7, a body...sacrifice).

It is a messy work and He is not afraid to get His hands dirty. In His acknowledgement of the work that God gave Him, He indicates the covenant arrangement that He willingly took upon Himself. He agreed to the work; He is willingly obedient. He willingly took the submissive role of obedient servant ("**Behold, I have come to do your will, O God,**" Heb 10.7).

2A. He is faithful in His obedience

The work He did is broader than the work on the cross. It is additional to that work; it is the larger context of that work. The work on the cross has a special place in that work (the suffering of the cross is the hour that has come, vs. 1), but the work is more inclusive than the cross. It is a work on earth, over His time on earth with a focus on the hour of the cross. In this context, the faithful obedience of Jesus means that He completed the assigned work, *and* He completed it with the right goal always in mind; we should reflect on these two things.

a) He faithfully completed the assigned work

To get our teeth into this text, we need to consider how the work is finished when there is still more to do. He is near the end of His time on earth, but there is still more teaching to give, He has yet to institute the Lord's Supper, and the actual time of intense suffering followed by resurrection is still future.

How then has He finished the work with more yet to do? On one hand, He accomplished everything agreed upon in the covenant that led to this point in time. I glorified you on earth; my mission on earth is now at its end. However, on the other hand, He says emphatically, that He accomplished the work: **having accomplished the work that you gave me to do** (17.4b). He reaches in thought to that which is *near at hand*. The *work that remains* in the short but intense time still ahead on earth is so certain in its accomplishment that Jesus can speak of it in the past tense, as already accomplished as well.

Included here is the determination of Christ to finish His work in total. In the shadow of the cross, in preparation for it, Jesus set His head like a flint to fulfill everything the Father gave Him to do in the eternal covenant of redemption, including death, even death as a common criminal in the shame of the cross.

Thus, Jesus fulfills the work of the covenant completely. It is not just any work, but the work God assigned for Him to do. He does it willingly per the agreement, and He now fulfills the agreement. His faithfulness is determined and complete. I love to think about how Jesus saves us by His faithful determination or His determined faithfulness.

b) He faithfully completed the assigned work for the right goal

He glorified God in His faithful obedience as He says, **"I glorified you on earth."** He was truly servant to another, always seeking how to honor the Father. Earlier, when Jesus suffered in anticipation of the approaching hour, He spoke of the trouble of His soul: **"my soul is exceedingly troubled and what shall I say? I must say, 'Father, save me from this hour'"** (Jn 12.27). Thus, we want to know what sustained Him in His experience, ahead of time, of the dreadful cross. What sustained Him was His commitment to glorify the Father. His focus on the glory of the Father through it all sustained Him: **"Father glorify your name"** (Jn 12.28). When Jesus looked at the cross and recoiled from it with a fully human desire for self-preservation, He superimposed a focus and concentration on His supreme goal: to glorify the Father in heaven.

3A. He is self-sacrificing in His obedience

The idea of self-sacrifice comes from 17.5: **And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.** At first glance, you might miss the point of self-sacrifice here because we hear Jesus petition the Father to glorify Him (**And now, Father, glorify me**). That does not sound like humiliation; it sounds like exaltation.

True enough, but the exaltation involves the restoration of something that was lost or forfeited. He is asking for the glory that He once had, that He does not now have, and that He seeks to have again. How should we try to understand the truth that is here?

1) We must acknowledge the fact of paradox

It is useful to note the paradox here regarding the Lord Jesus that He is both God and man in one person with two natures.

WSC 21 Who is the Redeemer of God's elect? A. The only Redeemer of God's elect is the Lord Jesus Christ, who, being the eternal Son of God, became man, and so was, and continueth to be, God and man in two distinct natures, and one person, for ever.

WCF 8.2 The Son of God, the second person in the Trinity, being very and eternal God, of one substance and equal with the Father, did, when the fulness of time was come, take upon Him man's nature, with all the essential properties and common infirmities thereof, yet without sin; being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost, in the womb of the Virgin Mary, of her substance. So that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion. Which person is very God, and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man.

Thus, we must neither divide the person nor confound the natures.

The illustration of the two ropes in a well helps us try to find our way when facing a paradox in Scripture. Picture yourself standing on a ledge half way down in a deep empty well. Hundreds of feet below are jagged rocks at the bottom that guarantee sure death if you fall. Looking up hundreds of feet you can see daylight. Now, in front of you are two ropes dangling with hope of a way out. The ropes extend separately up into the light and disappear there out of sight. How can you get out of the well? If you grab onto one rope you will plummet to the bottom. If you grab onto the other rope you will fall to your demise. To get out of the well, you must grab on to both ropes at the same time. The reason that you must grab on to both ropes is that they are actually a single rope on a pulley above the well (you cannot see the connection).

The deity and humanity of Christ are like these two ropes; you must hold to both in order to find salvation. How they connect together to form a single rope is beyond our vision. Because the writing on one says, Jesus is fully God, and the writing on the other says, Jesus is fully man, we might think that we have two different ropes or teachings that contradict each other. But beyond our ability to see it, the ropes connect in the person of God the Son, the eternal I am who existed before Abraham and before the creation of the world. In the beginning, He was with God and He was God. He was active in creating all things. Then in the fullness of time, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (Jn 1).

2) We must bow at the feet of Jesus Christ

We need to approach this teaching most humbly. That is, we need to stretch our minds to the farthest limits and then submit our reason, our reasoning, and our reasoning selves humbly at the feet of Christ.

Jesus is God. He is God the Son. As God, He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He is perfect in every way. He does not change in His perfection for if He either decreased or increased in perfection, then He would not be perfect and He would not be God.

Accordingly, Jesus said to the Jews, "Before Abraham was, I am." These are astounding words. He is saying that before Abraham existed (thousands of years before the coming of Christ in flesh) He existed as the eternal and self-sufficient God of the covenant. Here in John 17, Jesus takes us back in thought to a "time" before time, to the state of affairs that existed when there was no created universe. In that state of affairs, the person praying the high priestly prayer was in the presence of the Father possessing all glory in a fellowship of love (you loved me before the foundation of the world, v. 24).

Now in covenant obedience, He seeks restoration to that glory. In other words, and with words that barely scratch the surface of the teaching here, the obedience of Jesus is such that He in fact entered an experience of not being in the presence of the Father; He in fact experienced not having the glory that was always His before the creation of the world. He did so without ceasing to be God the Son. He did so without change in His essential properties as God. He continued to be fully God (the same yesterday, today, and forever) while He took upon Him human nature with all the properties and infirmities thereof, yet without sin.

To be specific, the paradox is that Jesus Christ is one person with two natures, a divine nature and a human nature. The eternally existing person, the I am, the Son of God who existed before the creation of the world with all the attributes that make God, God, added to Himself a

human nature such that He continues to be God and man in two distinct natures and one person forever. He did this in a profound act of voluntary self-sacrifice; one that was not necessary for Him to do in itself, but that was necessary to fulfill the eternal covenant for the salvation of sinners.

Who is Jesus Christ? We can answer this question with some deep theological and philosophical distinctions (such as, He is one person with two natures and we must neither divide the person nor confound the natures). On the other hand, we can answer this question by affirming with grateful and loving hearts that He is the obedient Son of God, the obedient God who is covenantally obedient. Thus, we can say happily and gladly of Him that He is willing, faithful, and self-sacrificing in His covenant obedience to the Father for the glory of God and for our very salvation.

May we fall down before the majesty of Jesus Christ the Son of God and Son of Man who is the Word that was in the beginning with God, who was God, and who took flesh and tabernacled among us. To Him be all glory both now and forever more, amen.

What then shall we say to these things?

When we remember along the lines of God's reminding, we come face to face with our Lord Jesus Christ in a precious and distinct way. Then, we must respond. The remembering is part of communion and so is the response of partaking of the elements of bread and wine that represent His body and blood. In the provision of this food, we have God's promise of nourishment. In partaking of this food, we confess and say at least three basic things.

1) I need Him

I need the Lord Jesus Christ. I need the Son of God who became flesh in order to save sinners. I acknowledge my sin and my need of Him. In a prayer, I say, "O Lord Jesus I need you."

2) I own Him

That is, by taking the elements to my lips and palate, I claim an interest in the work that He accomplished on earth. I appropriate His body and blood as my nourishment to sustain my life. In other words, I own the Lord Jesus Christ, very God and very man, as my prophet, priest, and king. In a prayer, by this symbolic action of eating and drinking, I say, "O Lord Jesus I own you as my very own, as my prophet, priest, and king. I thus commit myself to serve you in every way, to learn of you as your disciple, to learn your holy word in the sixty-six books of the Bible. I cling to your work for me on the cross. I submit myself, all that I possess and all I hope to be to service in your kingdom."

3) I own His family as my family

Because there is only one loaf, Christ, and because we being many are one in Him, then we are one loaf. In coming to Christ, I must acknowledge that I come to a family, to His family of brothers and sisters. He purchased these covenant children with His own blood on the cross. He is the elder brother in the family. Embracing Him in truth, I must embrace His brothers and sisters as my brothers and sisters. Bottom line: I must be what I am, a child of the king and a member in the family. I must embrace the family in real down to earth ways because of Jesus Christ the Lord of Glory.