

Jesus is the Savior of the World (Jn. 17.20-23)

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**John 17:20-23** <sup>20</sup> "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, <sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, <sup>23</sup> 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.

## Introduction

For communion remembering today, we return again to John 17 and particularly to verses 20-23. In these verses, we have clarification regarding the Lord's high priestly prayer; it has a self-referring quality to it. There are some difficulties here, but we want to handle them in a manner that keeps our focus on the Lord Jesus. Whatever the challenges may be that we have to work through, we should have it as our primary goal to remember our Lord in a distinct (and disciplined) way. Therefore, we avoid a "bare memorial" in our remembering when we direct our thinking and our faith tirelessly to Him. Although we may seem to wander from our precise goal at times, in the end we must "cast our eyes upon Jesus to look fully into His wonderful face so that we may find nourishment in the light of His majesty and grace." Two things come into view in this text: the objects and the objectives of His prayer. We might call this the scope and the aims of His intercession. We can outline this material by means of two questions: 1) for whom does Jesus pray? 2) What does He petition in His prayer?

### 1A. For whom does Jesus pray in His great high priestly prayer?

He tells us the scope of His prayer in 17.20: **I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word.** His words set forth a contrast between "these" and "those." This is a not/but contrast; however, it is not a hard contrast from the negative to the positive. Instead, it moves from something to something more. So, two things are present here. On one hand, He prays for His apostles and on the other hand, He prays also for believers. As we consider each, it will become more and more apparent that the contrast is by addition rather than by negation. Furthermore, we will find more here than first meets the eye.

#### 1B. He prays for the apostles

In context, the word "these" refers back to the apostles. This is clearly evident in what precedes in 17.12-19: <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. <sup>16</sup> They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. <sup>17</sup> Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. <sup>18</sup> As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. <sup>19</sup> And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth. Thus, the apostles are in view as *particular persons* that Jesus kept and guarded so that none of them were lost except Judas. In the case of the lost condition of Judas, God brought His will, revealed in Scripture, to realization.

Now, we should consider the impact of the words "not ... for these only" (17.20a). This phrase tells us that though Jesus isolates the apostles at times in prayer distinctively for them, we should not read these words and listen to our Lord's petitions with a sense of exclusivity. In other words, nowhere does the prayer focus on the apostles only and exclusively. This is a helpful point to ponder in the prayer as we read what comes before and what comes after verse 20.

Early on, Jesus prayed for the given ones: **Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, <sup>2</sup> since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him**

(17.1b-2). He speaks here of “all” that the Father gave to Him. This is more comprehensive than the apostles. Therefore, although the Lord Jesus mentions His work on earth (17.4) in which He manifested the Father’s name to the apostles as given ones (17.6, **the people whom you gave me**), and although He explains much about them and the knowledge that He gave them of the Father’s words (17.8, **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**), all the “given ones” are in view in the references He makes to the apostles.

To put it another way, the apostles *are* the church in nucleus; they *are* the coming church in its beginning; they *are* the coming church representatively. Thus, the expression “given ones” has in view the apostles and all who make up the church down through the ages. In some places here, the apostles are in view in an accented way and the church is submerged in that accent (v. 6, **I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world**). Still, this is not exclusive of the church; it is simply the church in its representatives who lay the foundation of the truth in their witness to Christ that unfolds eventually in the NT.

After 17.20, accent falls on the church that the apostles are part of and represent (v. 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**). In verses 25-26, the thought shifts back to the apostles in their representative role in history facing opposition from the world (**O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. <sup>26</sup> I made known to them your name**). Of course, as the apostles face opposition, likewise, the church they represent will face opposition until the end of the age. This interplay between the apostles and all disciples also occurs in Matthew 10 (Jesus speaks to the twelve as “you” and “your” up to verse 31; then, there is a shift to “everyone” and “whoever” in verses 32 and following).

Therefore, the election of the apostles and their place in the covenant of redemption (Jn. 17.6, **Yours they were, and you gave them to me**) speaks representatively of the election of all members of the church. All the given ones are owned by the Father’s electing love. They are the elect church represented by the apostles. The apostles are the elect church in nuclear form. Thus, Jesus informs us that He does not pray just for the apostles at any point in the prayer (cf. Ridderbos, *John*, 558).

Now, to shift gears slightly, in the latter part of 17.20, Jesus speaks of the church that the apostles represent *as believers*. We turn now to this fact that fills out our answer to the question, “for whom does Jesus pray?”

#### 2B. Jesus prays for believers

He says, **I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word** (17.20). The apostles relate to the rest of the church like a foundation relates to a building: a foundation is the part of the building that holds it securely in place. Thus, Paul states that the church is built on the foundation of the apostles with Jesus as the cornerstone (Eph. 2.20). The apostles are foundational because Jesus commissioned them to give an infallible witness to Him by their words. The apostolic words are the means by which Jesus brings His covenant people (the rest of the given ones) to faith. He does this out of the resources of the supreme authority God gave Him in covenant before He came into the world (**you have given him authority over all flesh**, 17.2a). At this point in time, our Lord is Sabbath king *prospectively*. The reference is 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 (Acts 2.36). Still, the Father gave Him this authority *as promise and guarantee* in the eternal covenant. This brings us to the fact that He has this universal, comprehensive, and sovereign authority over every human being for a very specific purpose: to give eternal life to the elect.

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. Having universal authority, Jesus goes to the cross for the particular purpose of saving the "given ones." 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. Thus, through the word of the apostles that goes out to the ends of the earth to the end of the age (Mat. 10, 28), Jesus gives eternal life to those that the Father gave to Him in the eternal covenant of redemption. He does this by high priestly intercession pleading the cause of His death and by Spirit empowered preaching of the gospel.

Back to our question: for whom does Jesus pray? In a word, Jesus prays for the Father's elect (all the given ones) interceding for them on the basis of the blood He shed for them. He prays for the apostles (the elect church in nuclear form) and for all who will believe through their word (the elect church represented by the apostles).

## 2A. What does Jesus petition in His prayer?

The answer to this question is at the least striking and pungent. Jesus has a universal element in His prayer. He does not limit His concerns to the realities of election and covenant. Rather, He speaks of goals that are not only for the given ones but also for the world. In a word, the self-sacrificing consecration and petition of Christ has the certain goal of saving the world: <sup>21</sup> **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.** <sup>22</sup> **The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one,** <sup>23</sup> **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** (17.21-23).

"World" refers to the fallen sinful world, therefore, it means fallen sinners, and all flesh since the fall (except Christ of course). In John 17.14, the world is said to hate Christ and His people (**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.**). Other places in John it is used for the human family that stands in opposition and contradiction to God. It is all that is disgusting. If we love it, then we do not love God (**1 Jn. 2:15, Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him**). Such is the contradiction between the world and God.

The term world is not distributive (as is the phrase "all flesh", 17.2) but intensive; it not quantitative but qualitative. It has the particular connotation of evil, lawlessness, and rebellion against God. Jesus tells us that He will save the God-hating and rebellious world of sinners cursed by the fall. Therefore, it reveals the amazing love of God in Christ, the "so loved" point of John 3.16-17: **for God so loved the world that He gave His...Son...to save the world.** Saving the world in fact (for sure) is His determined purpose in Christ: God gave Him to the cross in order to render certain the actual saving of the world. As John 3.17 puts it, **For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him** (NIV). Accordingly, Jesus is the Lamb of God that *takes away* the sin of the world (Jn. 1.29). Thus, Jesus is the Savior of the world. He will in fact save the world: believing and knowing result in eternal life for the world. Many individuals will perish, but He will save the world.

At this point, the fact of election in the context forces this question upon us: how does the church becoming one lead to the world's saving knowledge (<sup>22</sup> **The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one,** <sup>23</sup> **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** (17.22-23)?

The idea is that *in the future* when the church (the given ones, the elect) becomes one and enters heaven to behold the glory of Christ *that will be the salvation of the world of sinners*. Therefore, beyond election and covenantal giving is the highlighted fact of the sinfulness of those that make up the new and redeemed world in glory. The accent is on the sinfulness of the human family in its entirety. Thus, the salvation that Christ secures by His prayer reveals His love, mercy, and grace in an astounding way. His love is so strong that it overcomes the massive and intensive evil of the fallen human family.

## Conclusion

The risen Lord Jesus is universal sovereign and Sabbath king. To Him the Father committed all authority in heaven, on earth, and over all flesh in order that He may give eternal life to all the people that Father gave Him in the eternal covenant of redemption. Therefore, we sing, “O worship the king all glorious above; we gratefully sing His power and His love”

Moreover, our glorious king will have a redeemed world as the fruit of His saving love and effectual intercession. Jesus does not simply save some people out of the world though He does do that across the unfolding days of human history. Pointedly, He saves the world in saving His elect. His elect will make up the saved world at the end of human history. The fact that they will constitute a saved *world* marks the pit “from which they were digged.” The world of sinners, the sinful human family, will become the renewed world and redeemed human race.

**May we fall down before the majesty of Jesus Christ the Lord of glory and Savior of the world; may the Holy Spirit enable us to worship Him in truth and righteousness; may He teach us to draw near to our Father in heaven in the communion of the saints for divinely blessed fellowship, amen.**

What then shall we say to these things?

1) I need the Savior of the world

I know that I would not come to the light and that I would continue to hate the light and oppose its exposure if it were not for the power of His love and grace. Taking these elements I acknowledge my sin and my need of the body and blood of Christ that the bread and wine represent. This becomes a prayer: “O Lord Jesus, I need you.”

2) I own Him as my very own

By taking the bread and wine to my palate, I symbolize what should be in my heart, namely, an appropriation of the Lord Jesus as my very own Lord and Savior. I say, “He is not just the great Savior of the world; He is my Savior. This is another way of expressing my baptismal pledge: I commit myself to live under the authority of the risen Lord Jesus as my prophet, priest, and king.” As a prayer this becomes: “O Lord Jesus I own you as my very own.”

3) I own His people as my family

Today we may be a little flock, but tomorrow we will be the world. One thing that the use of the word world adds to this discussion is that the *sinful* human race will be saved *as a family*. The election of sinners unto eternal life does not have the design of saving an individual here and another one there. Jesus is not a redeemer of men who gives up on the race fallen in Adam. Thus, though individuals will perish, the human family, as the world and all that stands in contradiction to God, will be saved because Jesus is the Savior of the world.

Therefore, I take these elements with the prayer of commitment to do good to all men, but especially to the household of faith. Lord Jesus, I own your people everywhere as my family.

### **Addendum: a believing world that knows God's love for the church**

In the consummation of all things, the focal point in the salvation of all the elect that make up the new world of glory is Jesus, as the one promised and sent by the Father. Thus, Jesus prays for the salvation of the church (that all may be one in glory) in order to bring the final part of God's plan of saving the fallen human family to realization. He prays for the completion of the process of saving the world.

The fact that saved world will know that God loved the church is surely the point of Ephesians 1:3-14: <sup>3</sup>**Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.** <sup>4</sup>**For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love** <sup>5</sup>**he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will--** <sup>6</sup>**to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.** <sup>7</sup>**In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace** <sup>8</sup>**that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.** <sup>9</sup>**And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ,** <sup>10</sup>**to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment--** <sup>11</sup>**to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.** <sup>12</sup>**In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will,** <sup>13</sup>**in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.** <sup>14</sup>**And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit,** <sup>15</sup>**who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession-- to the praise of his glory.** In other words, when the redemption of those who are God's possession occurs (v. 14), and when all things in heaven and earth come together under one head, then the world will believe the gospel summarized in the sending of Christ, know His love for the church, and praise the glory of His grace (v. 6, 14).

In anticipation of the cross (in the high priestly prayer of Jn. 17), Jesus prays for the building of the church into a unity in order to bring into existence the final part of God's plan of saving the fallen human family. He emphasizes the knowledge that the redeemed humanity will have that centers in the sending of Christ (as a redemptive-historical and covenantal summary). Centrally, the redeemed world will know that love is at the bottom of God's saving plan and they will know the love that the Father displayed on the church. The emphasis on the church is present in His intercession on earth because it is yet to be built on the apostolic foundation. His concern is for the elect and the work of God that will transition them from wrath to grace in the future. He seeks the great objective of the church in glory when the entire redeemed world will know the love that the Father showed toward these yet to be gathered from the nations.