

John 17:1-29

¹ When Jesus had said this, he raised his eyes to heaven and said, “Father, the hour has come. Give glory to your son, so that your son may glorify you, ² just as you gave him authority over all people, so that he may give eternal life to all you gave him. ³ Now this is eternal life, that they should know you, the only true God, and the one whom you sent, Jesus Christ. ⁴ I glorified you on earth by accomplishing the work that you gave me to do. ⁵ Now glorify me, Father, with you, with the glory that I had with you before the world began. ⁶ ‘I revealed your name to those whom you gave me out of the world. They belonged to you, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷ Now they know that everything you gave me is from you, ⁸ because the words you gave to me I have given to them, and they accepted them and truly understood that I came from you, and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹ I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for the ones you have given me, because they are yours, ¹⁰ and everything of mine is yours and everything of yours is mine, and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹ And now I will no longer be in the world, but they are in the world, while I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one just as we are. ¹² When I was with them I protected them in your name that you gave me, and I guarded them, and none of them was lost except the son of destruction, in order that the scripture might be fulfilled. ¹³ But now I am coming to you. I speak this in the world so that they may share my joy completely. ¹⁴ I gave them your word, and the world hated them, because they do not belong to the world any more than I belong to the world. ¹⁵ I do not ask that you take them out of the world but that you keep them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They do not belong to the world any more than I belong to the world. ¹⁷ Consecrate them in the truth. Your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world. ¹⁹ And I consecrate myself for them, so that they also may be consecrated in truth. ²⁰ ‘I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me. ²² And I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may be brought to perfection as one, that the world may know that you sent me, and that you loved them even as you loved me. ²⁴ Father, they are your gift to me. I wish that where I am they also may be with me, that they may see my glory that you gave me, because you loved me before the foundation of the world. ²⁵ Righteous Father, the world also does not know you, but I know you, and they know that you sent me. ²⁶ I made known to them your name and I will make it known, that the love with which you loved me may be in them and I in them.’”

Introduction

Our passage today is taken from the “Farewell Discourse” of Jesus contained in five chapters of John (13:1-17:56). In other words, we have but a few verses which are an integral part of a much larger passage. Accordingly, the Discourse can be outlined in a number of ways, though three main parts are fairly clear:

- The first part (13:31-14:31) focuses on Jesus’ departure and discusses the disciples’ relation to Jesus and their conflict with the world.
- The second part (15:1-16:33) develops these same themes, moving from the relationship of Jesus to the disciples, using the figure of the vine and the branches (15:1-17), to the conflict between the disciples and the world (15:18-16:15), and on to a promise to the disciples of joy in the future after the sorrow of this time of separation (16:16-33).
- In the third major part Jesus prays to his Father (17:1-26).

Throughout, the overall theme is the Father’s presence with the disciples and the Son’s and Spirit’s roles in mediating his presence. As a way of establishing a context lets first consider a wider view of at least a portion of our passage by considering the text surrounding Jesus’ departure (13:31-14:31).

Jesus’ prayer (17:1-26)

These chapters of farewell discourse (chs. 13–17), with a precedent in the formal and final addresses of Moses (Deut 29–34), of Jacob (Gen 49), and of Paul (Acts 20:17–38), are brought to a fitting conclusion by Jesus' prayer in chapter 17. This whole chapter is one long prayer directed by Jesus to the Father, his own solemn expansion, one might say, of the simple "Our Father" he taught his disciples in Matt 6 and Luke 11. Positioned between heaven and earth, between his Father and his disciples, Jesus prays for believers present and future.

There are many schemas for understanding this chapter, however, it is perhaps best considered by simply following the context of Jesus' prayer as follows:

- Father and Son
- Son and current disciples
- Son and future disciples

Father and Son (vv. 1–5): In these five verses, Jesus speaks directly to his Father. The hour has come; the manifestation of the divine presence (glorification) is the task. Eternal life will consist in recognizing this divine presence. As the evangelist puts it in verse 3 — and this is his whole Logos, or word theology — "Now this is eternal life, that they should know you, the only true God, and the one whom you sent, Jesus Christ." To know God in the Son whom he has sent is eternal life. Jesus has manifested that presence on earth (v. 4) and will now return to that presence at the Father's side (v. 5). He has finished the work given him to perform (v. 4). The true nature of God, which is love, is about to be manifested in Jesus' self-sacrificing death.

Son and disciples (vv. 6–19): Jesus' conversation with the Father now turns to the subject of the disciples. To them has Jesus made known the Father's name (presumably the I AM that the Father has shared with the Son), and they have accepted the word (v. 6) and the message (v. 8), believing that what Jesus has comes from him who sent him (vv. 7–8). In a word, they have believed in Jesus' divine origin and divine union.

It is for these disciples that Jesus prays at this moment of departure in verses 9–19. He prays specifically:

- "keep them in your name that you have given me" (v. 11);
- "that they may be one just as we are one" (v. 11);
- "that they may share my joy completely" (v. 13);
- that the Father "keep them from the evil one" (v. 15);
- that he "consecrate them in the truth" (v. 17).

In paraphrase, what Jesus asks for his disciples is that they be protected by the immense power of the I AM (which will be demonstrated graphically in 18:6); that their unity resemble, and be based on, the intimate union of Father and Son; that their sorrow be changed into the divine joy that the Son reflects from his Father; that they be guarded from the prince of this world; that they be truly consecrated — as is Jesus — in complete dedication to God's service, which will be a mission to the world (vv. 18–19).

Son and future disciples (vv. 20–26): For future disciples, Jesus prays for one central gift — unity: "that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you ... that they also may be in us ... that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be brought to perfection as one" (vv. 21–23). It will be only through this evidence of loving unity that the mission to the world (v. 18) can be effective; for only if the loving union of disciples is apparent can the world believe (v. 21), can the world know (v. 23) that the Father has sent Jesus and that the Father's love can be found in the disciples as it can be found in Jesus himself (v. 23). Where this loving unity of disciples is found, there too will be found the

company of Jesus (v. 24), the divine presence (v. 24), the power of the divine name, and the living love of both Father and Son (v. 26).

Recurring themes

Father. One cannot fail to note the frequent recurrence of “Father,” a total of six times (vv. 1, 5, 11, 21, 24, 25). This reflects Jesus’ own unique use of the Aramaic *Abba* (“loving Father”), with which he customarily began his prayer. Perfectly joined to the Father in oneness, he remains at all times the obedient and loving Son.

Unity. The central motif of the prayer is that of unity — unity of present and future disciples, a unity modeled on that of Father and Son, a union that takes root from the love of Father and Son that is gifted to all disciples (v. 26).

Love. There is strong insistence on love: the Father’s love for the disciples (v. 23), the Father’s love for Jesus (vv. 23–24), the Father’s love for Jesus and the disciples (v. 26). The Father’s love is the supreme revelation of the Gospel. Jesus, the incarnate Word, speaks the Father in one word — LOVE. Throughout this whole prayer, it is clear that the church is meant to be a community of love, the living sign or sacrament of the mutual love of Father and Son.

The world. The “world” is mentioned seventeen times in these verses. It is the world of anti-world, the center of disbelief and hatred and unlove, the contrast and contradiction to what Christian living should be. Judas (v. 12) is an example of one to whom all was offered and rejected, one who experienced light and life but left it for darkness and death. While this world is not here the object of Jesus’ prayer, yet it is not a world for which Jesus has no hope or feeling. While the strong emphasis lies on prayer for Jesus’ actual and future disciples, verses 21 and 23 do pray that, through Christian unity, the world may believe and know that Jesus has been sent by a loving Father.

Echoes of the Our Father. Though the customary “Our Father” is not found in the Fourth Gospel, there are tiny echoes of it that, fittingly enough, appear in this uniquely Johannine prayer. “Father,” as we have seen, is found six times as Jesus’ prayerful address. Reference to God’s name — similar to “Hallowed be thy name” — occurs in verses 6, 11, 12, and 26. Reference to glorification in verses 1, 5, and 24 brings into view the divine presence, the hope of “Thy kingdom come.” And the request (v. 15) that the disciples be guarded from the evil one echoes the similar and final request of the “Our Father” in Matt 6:13.

Commentary

Father and Son (vv. 1–5)

By lifting up his eyes toward heaven (17:1), Jesus strikes a customary posture in prayer (*cf.* Ps. 123:1; Mark 7:34; Luke 18:13). The first unit in this prayer is Jesus’ intercession for himself (17:1–5). Jesus’ opening petition, “Father, … Glorify your Son, in order that the Son may glorify you” (17:1), implies Jesus’ claim to deity, as the OT affirms that God will not give his glory to another (e.g., Isa. 42:8; 48:11). God’s granting of authority to Jesus (17:2; *cf.* 5:27) marks the inbreaking of a new era (*cf.* Isa. 9:6–7; Dan. 7:13–14; see also Matt. 11:27; 28:18; *cf.* also Wis. 10:2).

“Father, the hour has come. Give glory to your son, so that your son may glorify you,² just as you gave him authority over all people, so that he may give eternal life to all you gave him.³ Now this is eternal life, that they should know you, the only true God, and the one whom you sent, Jesus Christ.

With regard to Jesus’ statement in 17:2–3, the emphasis on the possession of eternal life in the here and now in John’s Gospel differs from the perspective conveyed by the Synoptics, which, in keeping with the Jewish attitude prevalent at the time of Jesus, view eternal life primarily as a possession to be attained in “the age to come.” But in John’s Gospel the distinction between “the present age” and “the age to come” is collapsed; with Jesus, eternity has entered into human existence already in the present. This

realization is rooted in the knowledge that God is life itself, and that Jesus is the Son of God (cf. 1:4; 5:26; 20:31).

“Knowing” God (17:3) is not merely a function of cognitive knowledge (thus in his first epistle John disputes the communion with God falsely claimed by Gnostic teachers); rather, it means living in fellowship with him (Carson 1991: 556; Barrett 1978: 504). This is in keeping with the Hebrew use of the term “to know,” which encompasses even the most intimate human relationship, sexual intercourse (e.g., Gen. 4:1 LXX). Although God can be known to a limited extent through creation (Rom. 1:18–25), ultimately, as acknowledged also in Hellenistic Jewish literature (Wis. 15:3), knowledge of God is contingent upon salvation (Barrett 1978: 503). In the Dead Sea Scrolls “life” or “eternal life” and “eternal knowledge” are set in close parallelism (CD-A III, 20; 1QS II, 3; cf. 1QS IV, 22; XI, 3–4).

That God is the “only true God” (17:3) is affirmed supremely in the Shema: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deut. 6:4; cf. John 5:44; 1 Thess. 1:9; 1 John 5:20; for additional references, see Köstenberger 2004: 488, esp. note 24). Jesus, in turn, is the exclusive agent, sole authorized representative of this one true God; he is the God-sent Messiah, God’s Anointed One, the Christ. Just as there is only one true God, so also there is only one way to the Father: Jesus Christ (17:3, forming an *inclusio* with 1:17; another *inclusio* is formed by the references to Jesus’ “work,” in the singular, in 17:4 and 4:34; regarding Jesus’ self-reference in the third person, see Jackson 1999, esp. 24–31).

“And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world came into being” (17:5). The phrase “and now” is found also in the OT in Yahweh’s instructions to Moses (Exod. 19:5) and in the conclusion of David’s prayer (2 Sam. 7:25–26) with reference to a result that should follow on the basis of the truth of certain facts (Beasley-Murray 1999: 292 note c). Preexistence is ascribed also to wisdom in Second Temple literature (e.g., Wis. 7:25; 9:10–11) on the basis of its portrayal in the OT book of Proverbs (esp. 8:28, 30). In John’s Gospel preexistence is ascribed to Jesus by the designation “the Word” (1:1, 14); the title “Son of Man” (3:13; 6:62); the reference to Jesus being the “I am” preceding Abraham (8:58); and the reference to Jesus as the one who came from the Father and who is about to return to him (16:28).

Jesus and Current Disciples (vv. 6–19)

The next unit in Jesus’ prayer contains his intercession for his disciples (17:6–19), which commences with a rehearsal of his own ministry to them (17:6–8). When Jesus speaks about revealing to his disciples God’s “name” (17:6; cf. 17:11–12), this encompasses who God is in his character, his essential nature (cf. Exod. 3:13–15; see Carson 1991: 558). Because his name is glorious, God wants it to be made known (e.g., Ps. 22:22; Isa. 52:6; Ezek. 39:7). The notion that Jesus reveals the Father in his whole person, both works and words, is foundational to John’s Gospel (e.g., 1:18; 8:19, 27; 10:38; 12:45; 14:9–11). In the OT God’s name is put in the central sanctuary (Deut. 12:5, 11), and knowledge of his name implies life commitment (Ps. 9:10). In John’s Gospel, likewise, Jesus’ revelation of God’s name must be met with obedience, and Jesus is shown to replace both tabernacle and temple, having become the “place” where God has put his name (see also Isa. 62:6; 65:15–16). The portrayal of Jesus in 17:7–8 is reminiscent of the description of the prophet like Moses in Deut. 18:18.

The following section contains Jesus’ actual prayer on behalf of his followers (17:9–19). Jesus’ petitions are for his disciples’ protection (17:11–16) and for their consecration for service in the truth (17:17–19). The conception underlying the address “Holy Father” in 17:11 goes back to Lev. 11:44 (cf. Ps. 71:22; 111:9; Isa. 6:3). Similar addresses appear in Jewish literature: “O holy Lord of all holiness” (2 Macc. 14:36); “O Holy One among the holy” (3 Macc. 2:2); “You are holy and your Name is awesome” (*Shemoneh Esreh* 3). Holiness is ascribed to God also in the book of Revelation (e.g., 4:8; 6:10). Importantly, in Jesus’ case addressing God as “holy” does not create a distance between him and God.

Jesus' reference in 17:12 to "the son of destruction" (a Semitism; cf. Matt. 23:15; see also 1QS IX, 16; X, 19; CD-A VI, 15; cf. XIII, 14) could refer either to Judas's character (cf. Isa. 57:4 LXX; *Jub.* 10:3) or his destiny (Isa. 34:5 LXX). In keeping with Johannine theodicy (cf. 12:38–40), even Judas's betrayal is said to have occurred "in order for Scripture to be fulfilled." This does not alter the fact that Judas made his decision as a responsible agent (see Mark 14:21/Matt. 26:24). Yet God sovereignly overrode Judas's evil designs to bring about his own good purposes (cf. Gen. 50:20). The antecedent passage probably is Ps. 41:9 (applied to Judas in John 13:18; see commentary there). Other scriptures fulfilled through Judas are Ps. 69:25; 109:8 (cited in Acts 1:20).

In 17:18 Jesus anticipates the commissioning of the disciples in 20:21. Just as Jesus was "set apart" and sent into the world (Morris 1995: 647–48n56), so also the disciples are set apart in order to be sent into the world. Jesus' relationship with the Father serves as the pattern for the disciples' relationship to Jesus as their sender (Köstenberger 1998b). A partial OT parallel is the instruction to Moses, who himself had been consecrated by God (Sir. 45:4) in order to consecrate others so that they too may serve God as priests (Exod. 28:41). Jesus' self-sacrifice on behalf of others is also reminiscent of the OT notion of "setting apart" sacrificial animals (cf., e.g., Deut. 15:19; see Michaels 1989: 297).

Jesus and Future Disciples (vv. 20–26)

Jesus does not stop at praying for himself and his disciples; his vision transcends the present, reaching beyond his immediate followers to those who will believe through their message (17:20–26; see the parallel in Deut. 29:14–15). Jesus' concern for unity (17:21–23) and love (17:26) among his followers is paralleled by exhortations to fraternal love and harmony in Jewish testamentary literature. This parting concern is attributed to Noah (*Jub.* 7:26), Rebecca (*Jub.* 35:20), Isaac (*Jub.* 36:4), Zebulon (*Testament of Zeb.* 8:5–9:4), Joseph (*Testament of Jos.* 17:2–3), and Dan (*Tesatment of Dan* 5:3). The Qumran covenanters, too, saw themselves as a *yahad* ("union") and displayed a keen consciousness of their election (for a discussion of Qumran parallels to the notion of unity in John 17, see Brown 1966–1970: 777). The vision of a unified people of God was expressed earlier in John's Gospel in 10:16 ("one flock and one shepherd," an allusion to Ezek. 34:23; 37:24) and 11:52 ("gathering of the scattered children of God into one"). In the present instance believers' unity results from being taken into the unity of God (cf. 10:38; 14:10–11, 20, 23; 15:4–5), and believers, once unified, will be able to bear witness to the true identity of Jesus as the Sent One of God.

The phrase "so that the world may believe/know that you sent me" (17:21, 23) is reminiscent of OT texts such as Zech. 2:9. The expression "before the beginning of the world" in 17:24 (an echo of 17:5) has frequent parallels in Judaism (e.g., *Gen. Rab.* 1:10; 2:5; *Lev. Rab.* 25:3; *Num. Rab.* 12:6; *Deut. Rab.* 10:2; *As. Mos.* 1:13–14; for further Jewish references, see Hauck 1965). A suggestive parallel is found in *Odes Sol.* 41:15, where the Messiah is said to have been "known before the foundations of the world, that he might give life to persons forever by the truth of his name."

The foundation for Jesus' following appeal is his recognition of God as the "righteous Father" (see commentary on 17:11). The OT commonly teaches that God is righteous and just (e.g., Ps. 116:5; 119:137; Jer. 12:1). With Jesus' betrayal and innocent suffering imminent, he affirms the righteousness of God his Father.

The words "I myself may be in them" in 17:26 are replete with covenantal overtones (cf. 14:20; 17:23). Subsequent to the giving of the law at Sinai, the glory of God displayed on the mountain (Exod. 24:16) came to dwell in the midst of Israel in the tabernacle (Exod. 40:34). As God's people moved toward the promised land, God frequently assured them that he was in their midst (Exod. 29:45–46; Deut. 7:21; 23:14). In John's prologue Jesus is said to have come to dwell (literally, "to tabernacle" [1:14]) among his people, and now Jesus' earthly presence is about to be transmuted into his spiritual presence in his followers, in keeping with OT notions of a new covenant (see commentary at 17:6). This concludes Jesus' final instruction to his disciples prior to the events of his passion.

