

“The Hour Has Come”

The Fifty-Second in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 17:1-5; Deuteronomy 6:1-15

Their evening together is now over. The hour has come. Jesus must leave the Upper Room, cross the Kidron Valley, and go to an olive grove on the Mount of Olives, where he will be arrested by members of the Sanhedrin (the Jewish ruling council). But in the moments before Jesus departs to accomplish his work of redemption, Jesus stops just long enough to pray: for himself, for his disciples, and for all those who will believe in him throughout the centuries yet to come after his ascension into heaven. Known as the “High-Priestly Prayer,” in the seventeenth chapter of his gospel, John reveals to us the heart of Jesus in the form of a prayer which Jesus offers to the Father in his final private moments with his disciples before together, they head out to Gethsemane. In this prayer (which is as much a “farewell” prayer as anything else) Jesus reveals much about the nature of his messianic mission, as well as the Father’s intention to save all those whom he has chosen, and whom he has given to the Son to redeem. This is the longest prayer of Jesus revealed anywhere in Scripture, and it comes at that critical moment between the end of his messianic mission, and the beginning of his Passion. In this prayer, we see that Jesus seeks nothing more than to bring glory to his Father, and in turn, to realize that glory he has known with the Father from all eternity.

One of the difficulties a preacher faces when preaching through John is that this Gospel contains lengthy discourses from Jesus which ideally should be covered in a single sermon to understand the overall flow of thought—so as not to miss the forest for the trees. Unfortunately, we do not have time to cover passages like John 17 in a single sermon without skipping over the Old Testament background, which is extensive, and which is necessary to fully understand what Jesus is saying and why. Furthermore, this passage is loaded with doctrinal significance and is just too rich in content and too important theologically to simply skim in a single sermon.

So, we will break up Jesus’ high priestly prayer into three sermons, each of which dealing with the particular focus of that section of the prayer. In John 17:1-5, Jesus prays to the Father that he (Jesus) will be glorified through his suffering and death which he is about to undergo, so as to bring the Father glory through his own obedience to the Fathers’ will. Then, we will devote a sermon to Jesus’ prayer for the disciples (vv. 6-19), before we conclude with that section of the prayer (vv. 20-26) in which Jesus prays for us—as Jesus puts it in verse 20, “*those who will believe in me through . . . [the disciples’] word.*” Once we complete the high priestly prayer, we will have completed the Upper Room Discourse, and we will then move into the final section of John’s Gospel (chapters 18-21) dealing with Jesus’ Passion.

John 17 is a truly remarkable passage because in it we witness the eternal word and Son of God pray to his Father on behalf of those for whom he is about suffer and die. There is much to learn about Jesus’ person and work as covenant mediator from studying the content of his prayers—especially this one. Jesus’ prayers are really one of the few hints we have of Jesus’ direct interaction with the Father, in the presence of whom and the Holy Spirit, Jesus has enjoyed an eternal bliss and fellowship. In the so-called “High Priestly Prayer” of John 17, Jesus seeks to bring glory to the Father and to himself, and he also prays that his disciples will be protected from the evil we will inevitably face in the world.

This prayer is also quite remarkable because it summarizes much of what we have already covered in our time in this gospel—in this sense it is much like the prologue to John (vv. 1-18) which also summarizes

much of the content John is about to set forth. In the “High-Priestly Prayer,” Jesus recounts that he is the supreme revelation of God through his words and saving deeds. His obedience will bring the Father glory, as well as save all those whom the Father has chosen to receive eternal life. Jesus prays that his disciples will love one another, and that they, in turn, fulfill their own mission which extends from our Lord’s saving work, which is to take the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Throughout the synoptic gospels there are a number of references made to the fact that Jesus spent much time in prayer to the Father during the course of his messianic mission. The content of these prayers is usually not revealed, although there are several notable exceptions—the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4), is one such instance. The others are associated with Jesus’ suffering. Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane (Matthew 26:26-44) reveals his desire to see the cup of wrath taken from him, and in Matthew 27:46 we read the haunting words spoken from the cross, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” These prayers focus upon our Lord’s obedience to the will of God, and reveal his deep, personal, and truly human pain and anguish which Jesus experiences in his suffering and dying.

The prayer recorded in John 17 reveals Jesus’ desire to bring the Father glory. This explains why Jesus’ focuses upon his obedience to the Father’s will—his suffering and dying. John has recorded two short prayers of Jesus previously. One is recounted at the tomb of Lazarus in John 11:41-42. “*Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me.*” The other is recorded in John 12:27-28. “*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. Father, glorify your name.*” Then a voice came from heaven: “*I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.*” Both of these prayers reveal that Jesus desires to obey to the Father’s will (despite the price to be paid in doing so), and that through his suffering, death, and resurrection, the Father will be glorified. This shows the deep and abiding bond between Jesus and the Father—a bond which is eternal.

As we turn to our text, the first five verses of chapter 17, it is clear that the teaching portion of the Upper Room Discourse is over, and that Jesus must now leave the disciples to go to Gethsemane where he will be arrested, and then tried before the Sanhedrin and Pilate. Despite the urgency to depart due to the lateness of the hour, as well as the need for Jesus to undertake the decisive act of his messianic mission—indeed everything which Jesus has said and done for three years anticipates his suffering and dying—Jesus stops to pray before departing. Although the prayer will take us three Sundays to cover, Jesus’ prayed fervently but briefly, the prayer taking but several minutes. Jesus will obey the Father’s will, he will bring the Father glory, and in turn, will himself be glorified.

In verse 1, John indicates a break with the teaching portion of the discourse set out in the previous chapters. “*When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, ‘Father, the hour has come.’*” Jesus’ desire to pray indicates the teaching discourse is over. And, in fact, Jesus says as much: “*Father the hour has come.*” As is customary among Jews, Jesus directs his eyes toward heaven when praying as indicated, for example, in Psalm 123:1, “*to you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!*” As an aside, I’m not sure where the custom of closing our eyes when we pray comes from, especially in light of the custom of Jesus, and the direction given in the Psalms of directing our gaze toward heaven when praying.

If you have been with us throughout our series in John you undoubtedly have noticed the progressive change in Jesus’ words from “my hour has not yet come” (John 2:4; 7:6, 8, 30; 8:20), to the phrase “my hour has come” (John 12:23, 27-28, 31-32; 13:1, 31), to the more definite “the” hour has come (as used

here). The moment for Jesus to suffer and die is at hand. Like months spent planning for a wedding (or similar big event), time seems to slowly tick away, then pick up speed when just a few days remain, until the moment actually comes when the bride and groom realize that they are standing before the minister and the words they are about to say will create a life-long bond and a legal contract. So too, we have witnessed Jesus speak of his hour as far off, then imminent (during in the final week of his ministry), then to “this is it.” *The* hour has come. It is time for Jesus to obey the Father’s will all the way unto death and complete his messianic mission.

That for which Jesus prays, tells us much about the nature of his mission. “*Glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you.*” In the opening portion of the prayer, Jesus offers only one petition unto his Father. Jesus asks that he might be glorified, and in doing so bring glory to the Father. The verb to “bring glory” indicates that God would be praised or honored.¹ This petition recalls the statement Jesus made in John 5:23, when he expressed his desire that “*that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him.*” To praise, honor, or give glory to the Son, is to praise, honor, or give glory to the Father. The one implies the other.

The great irony in this petition is that the one event which accomplishes both (Jesus’ death upon the cross), is an event which the world regards as shameful and disgraceful—the fate of a despised and lowly criminal. When viewed in this light, Jesus is asking the Father that after Jesus’ utter and total humiliation in the eyes of the world—when he hangs helplessly upon a Roman cross—the Father restore to Jesus to the glory he possessed with the Father in eternity past (as we will discuss in verse 5). This petition will be granted when Jesus is raised from the dead, and then ascends into heaven.

Throughout the prayer, we see that Jesus is not at all concerned with glory as the world understands glory, praise, and honor. Jesus seeks only to bring glory, honor, and praise to the Father, and in turn, receive such glory from the Father which he (Jesus) has already possessed. There is a profound recognition in this petition of Jesus’ own deity—something easy to overlook. We know this based upon several passages in Isaiah which echo in our Lord’s petition, and it is important to consider them. In Isaiah 42:8, YHWH declares, “*I am the Lord; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols.*” Likewise in Isaiah 48:11 we read, “*for my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another.*” Knowing that YHWH will not share his glory with another, Jesus nevertheless prays for this very thing—that he and the Father would glorify one another. In even making such a petition, Jesus is declaring that he is one with YHWH, and that he has already shared in that glory which YHWH will share with no one else.

In verse 2, Jesus gives us the theological basis for the petition in verse 1. “*Since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.*” These words reaffirm an earlier statement of Jesus from John 5:27. “*And [the Father] has given [Jesus] authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man.*” These words indicate that with the granting of such authority to Jesus, a new era in redemptive history is at hand (dominated by the kingly rule of Jesus from the Father’s right hand), and which has been foretold throughout the Old Testament as in Isaiah 9:6-7. “*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore.*”

¹ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 554.

The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.” Jesus’ prayer in John 17 is clearly prayed in light of those Old Testament texts which foretell of the coming one possessing such authority.

A similar point is found in Daniel 7:13-14. *“I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”* Jesus is that one foretold by Israel’s prophets who will possess the authority of YHWH. This authority will be evident when Jesus dies, and is then raised from the dead, before ascending into heaven, and then sending to us the “Helper,” the blessed Holy Spirit.

Jesus’ words reveal that the authority now given to him by the Father refers to the outworking of an eternal covenant (the so-called “covenant of redemption”) in which, before the foundation of the world, Jesus was given authority over all flesh (that is, over all the people of the earth) for the purpose of giving eternal life to all those, but only those, whom the Father has given to Jesus as part of this covenant. This indicates that before time began, the Father chose Jesus to be the Savior of all those whom the Father gives to the Son (the elect). Those whom the Father chooses, and for whom the Son will accomplish his redemptive work, are in turn given back to the Son as his inheritance (i.e., the church, which is his bride).

This eternal decree can be seen from yet another perspective, as in Revelation 7:9-10, where this same group (those chosen by the Father and redeemed by the Son) appears in a heavenly scene as redemptive history runs its course. *“After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’”* The great multitude before the throne are those given to Jesus, and for whom Jesus is praying in this, the High Priestly Prayer.

Here again, Jesus alludes to a statement he made earlier. In John 6:37-40, Jesus refers to this same group (the elect) whom he will redeem. *“All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”*

Thus it is possible (as many Reformed theologians do) to define Jesus’ messianic mission in terms of his coming to earth (in his incarnation) to save all those chosen by the Father from before the foundation of the world. This is why Jesus has been given authority by the Father over all flesh so that he might give eternal life to those who will believe. Therefore, when Jesus prays that he would be glorified and in doing so bring glory to the Father, Jesus is indicating that the way in which this glory will be revealed is when Jesus gives eternal life to all those given him by the Father. As one Puritan writer put it, “God is glorified chiefly in the salvation of sinners.” Indeed, both the Father and the Son are glorified in the salvation of sinners—when those who are dead in sin are given eternal life through the saving work of the Son, who, as we see in this prayer, is fulfilling the Father’s plan, established in eternity past.

A number of commentators call attention to the similarities between this prayer and other “big picture”

discussions of the plan of salvation found in the New Testament.² One of the most notable is Paul's account of his own apostolic calling as part of God's larger purpose as found in the opening verses of the Book of Romans. *"Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ."* In John 17, Jesus speaks of this mission in terms of bringing glory to the Father, while in Romans, Paul speaks of the purpose of God in bringing sinners to faith through the preaching of the gospel—the means by which God's elect are called to faith. The point is that when Jesus prays to the Father, he reveals that God has determined who will be saved, that the purpose of Jesus' messianic mission (in part), is to provide for their salvation, and that Jesus' disciples, in turn, will be sent to preach the person and work of Jesus to the ends of the earth. This theme is found throughout the New Testament, as seen in the words of Paul.

When Jesus accomplishes the work of redemption, his prayer is answered and he will indeed be glorified. As Paul tells us in Philippians 2:5-11, *"have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."* When Jesus gives eternal life to those given him by the Father, the Father is glorified. And in turn, Jesus will be glorified. This is the point Jesus made in chapter 16 that terrible pain precedes the joy of birth. In his case, his own suffering and humiliation secures for us our salvation, as evident in his resurrection from the dead.

Jesus continues this thought in verse 3. *"And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."* This statement is clearly a re-affirmation of the famous *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (part of our Old Testament lesson). *"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."* The one true God is YHWH, who is supremely revealed in and through the person of Jesus Christ, who has appointed Jesus to give eternal life to all who believe.

It is important to realize that when John speaks of "knowing the only true God" Jesus means much more than merely knowing about the true God—i.e., that someone merely assents to the truth that God exists (as in vainly repeating the *Shema*, or say, the Apostles' Creed), yet does not trust personally in Jesus Christ. By the way—this is a warning to heed for all reading this—the heart must follow what the mind knows to be true. Yes, there is a God, and you must trust in him through believing in Jesus. If you do not trust in Jesus to save you from your sins, Jesus says, you do not know God in these sense of which Jesus is speaking. And, you do not have eternal life.

The only way someone truly possesses eternal life is through knowing ("trusting" in and relying upon) the only true God, who has revealed himself through the person and work of Jesus Christ whom he (the Father) has sent. In other words, there is no true (saving) knowledge of God apart from the person of his

² Carson, The Gospel According to John, 555.

Son (Jesus). There is no eternal life without believing that Jesus Christ has been sent by God to secure eternal life for those who believe in the Father through him. This is how God is glorified: when people receive eternal life and know the true and living God through trusting in the work of his Son.

In verse 4, Jesus recounts how, throughout his messianic mission he has sought to bring glory to God. Jesus declares, *“I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do.”* Jesus’ entire messianic mission is such that in his incarnation, Jesus brought glory to YHWH. In John 1:14, John has told us, *“and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”* The reason why Jesus came to earth (taking to himself a true human nature) was for the purpose of granting eternal life to all those given him by the Father. In doing so, the Father is glorified. But Jesus is also clear that his mission has been fulfilled so far, and with the events about to come next (his death, resurrection, and ascension) Jesus has indeed accomplished everything necessary so that God might be glorified through the salvation of sinners.

In verse 5, Jesus asks to again enter into that glory he had known in eternity past in the presence of the Father, before undertaking his messianic mission and his incarnation. Jesus asks *“and now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.”* In the incarnation, Jesus did indeed give up the glory he had known from all eternity for the purpose of saving us from the guilt and power of sin. Reformed theologians speak of our Lord’s humiliation in terms of question and answer 37 of the Heidelberg Catechism: Q 37: What do you understand by the word “suffered?” A. That all the time [Jesus] lived on earth, but especially at the end of His life, He bore, in body and soul, the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race; in order that by His suffering, as the only atoning sacrifice, He might redeem our body and soul from everlasting damnation, and obtain for us the grace of God, righteousness, and eternal life.”

In asking for this glory to be restored Jesus is affirming his eternal pre-existence (there never was a time when the Son was not) as well as his desire to return to the glory of the Father which Jesus had known from all eternity. With his saving work about to be accomplished, Jesus longs to return to the Father, and in turn, will send to us the blessed Holy Spirit, who will unite us (on earth) to Jesus (in heaven), even as Jesus returns to the presence of the Father. What is more, Jesus will be raised in a gloried body fit for eternity, and which guarantees our own resurrection from the dead and the glorification of our bodies on that day when Jesus returns to earth, his glory no-longer veiled by human flesh, and on that day to be revealed to all when accompanied by the hosts of heaven.

The truly remarkable thing to consider in the High Priestly Prayer is that Jesus voluntarily gave up his eternal glory, and then veiled it with human flesh, so as to come to earth to suffer and die to secure the salvation of those chosen by the Father—sinful rebels who prefer darkness rather than light. Jesus is not asking to be returned to such glory before suffering and dying, but rather, because he has accomplished the work the Father sent him to do (or is about to), Jesus desires to return to the presence of that one with whom he has shared an unspeakable glory throughout the ages past. This is not a prayer asking to be delivered from the cross, but rather, it is a prayer asking that through the suffering and agony of the cross, both Jesus and the Father will be glorified.

As Jesus makes clear—God is glorified when those whom he has chosen to save, are granted eternal life and faith in Jesus. The hour has come for the Son to bring glory to the Father, and unto himself. Jesus will do this when he saves all those for whom he is about to suffer and die. This is what Jesus is seeking when he prays *“Glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you.”* He is asking to save all those given him by the Father.