

Missional Prayer Patterns from John 17

By

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That day will always be etched in my mind. I was praying at a missionary training center with a dear friend concerning the moving forward of God's Kingdom through our children's lives. Our praying was simple, yet very passionate and profound. Our hearts were broken and our desires were the same—"take our children and use them for Your glory, Lord." Of course, the results of these prayers were yet to be realized, but we both understood the seriousness of the moment. Where would these prayers take our children? What would this mean regarding the focus of their particular mission involvement? The Lord knew the future, and we could only watch and wait to see how these prayers would be answered in and through our children's lives.

That was ten plus years ago, and I must say—God has certainly answered beyond my expectations. He has sent my children to many points around the world to join Him in His mission. They have had the privilege to be with Him in His work of moving His Kingdom forward. What a joy to watch.

In Matthew 6:9-10 Jesus teaches His followers to pray toward the coming of His Kingdom and the accomplishment of His will on earth. This happens as people experience the rule and reign of Christ when they trust Him to be their Lord and Savior. This also continues to take place in believers as they grow in Christ. Jesus modeled this kind of Kingdom focused praying in John 17.

Over the next few pages we will examine some of the missional prayer patterns found in John 17. May we be challenged, encouraged and better equipped to pray toward the coming of the Kingdom as a result of this study.

John 17—A brief intro

Jesus has just finished the second part of his farewell discourse in John chapter 16.¹ His crucifixion and departure was something that his followers did not fully grasp, and from their earthly perspective, probably did not want to hear about or experience. Jesus assured them of His abiding presence, peace and victory. He also instructed them concerning promises relating to praying in His name (see John 16: 16-33).

¹ These discourses are found in John 13-17 and represent a very intimate time of fellowship and instruction for his closest followers. The material contained in these chapters is not found in the Synoptics, but only in John. Andreas Kostenberger divides the farewell discourses into three parts with John 17 being the third section. Borchert describes the farewell section as a farewell cycle because it includes more than discourse. For more on the farewell discourses see Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (New International Commentary on the New Testament), F. F. Bruce, ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1971), 610-715, Andreas J. Kostenberger, *Encountering John* (Encountering Biblical Studies) Walter A. Elwell, general ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 139-73; and Gerald Borchert, *John 12-21* (The New American Commentary), E. Ray Clendenen, general ed., v. 25B (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2002), 73-212.

The “high priestly” prayer of John 17 takes place in Jesus’ passion during the last week of His earthly life.² Over the next few days Jesus would be betrayed, arrested, beaten, crucified, and resurrected. During this intense time of His life and ministry Jesus could have prayed about many issues that related to the circumstances He was encountering. Yet, despite the circumstances, His prayer was entirely focused on the Father’s mission being fulfilled. In a nutshell, Jesus desired to please His Father and fulfill His desire to see His mission completed and His followers prepared for the challenges ahead. The reason--so that the Kingdom of God could be proclaimed and move forward through their witness.

Three Sections—Seven Petitions

Many scholars divide John 17 into three sections.³ Section 1 (17:1-5) represents Jesus’ prayer for His glorification and the completion of His mission. Section 2 (17:6-19) contains Jesus’ prayers for His disciples and their character. Section 3 (17:20-26) encompasses Jesus’ prayers for His disciples and future followers who believe through their witness.

Found within these three sections are seven actual petitions:⁴ Prayer for the glorification of the Father through the glorification of the Son (vs. 1); Prayer for the completion of the Christ event in the Ascension (vs. 5), prayer for Jesus’ disciples to be guarded or kept in His name (vs. 11), prayer for protection from the Evil One (vs. 15), prayer for the setting apart of His followers in the Word (truth) of God (vs. 17), Prayer for oneness (vs. 21) and prayer for His followers to be with Him where He is (vs. 24). All are missional in purpose and content and all are focused on seeing the Kingdom move forward in and through Jesus and his followers.

Jesus and His Mission (17:1-5)

Jesus wanted to complete His mission and please His Father. That was the most pressing desire of His heart (see John 8:28). His close intimate relationship with the Father is evident as He begins the prayer in verse 1 with the term “Father.”⁵ The tendency in prayer is often to treat it as something we just do, making it like a ritual or a task. Prayer is relational and is something we “are.” We cannot separate ourselves from our prayers. God answers his followers not just the prayers they pray.⁶

² Morris cautions readers that, although the common designation of the prayer as “high priestly” points to the “solemn” nature of the prayer and its focus on the cross and the consummation of His priestly work, a sense of hope, joy and expectancy are present as Jesus looks toward the cross, the ongoing work of His followers, and those who would believe through their witness (see Morris, 716).

³ Scholars differ some on what verses belong to the three sections although Kostenberger, 168-173, Morris (716), Andrew T. Lincoln, “God’s Name, Jesus’ Name, and Prayer in the Fourth Gospel,” in *Into God’s Presence*, Richard N. Longenecker, editor (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 160-63; and M. M. B. Turner, “Prayer in the Gospels and Acts,” in *Teach Us To Pray*, D. A. Carson, editor (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 77-80 all support these three categories and verse selection.

⁴ Borchert does not include verse 5 as a separate petition but does include verse 25 as a petition. The list I use is supported by Morris, Kostenberger and Lincoln.

⁵ The term “Father” or some form (e.g., “Holy Father”) of this intimate address is used 6 times in this chapter: verses, 1, 5, 11, 21, 24, and 25.

⁶ See Selwyn Hughes, *Everyday with Jesus* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2004), 15. Also see how the writer of Hebrews demonstrates this relational element in Hebrews 10:19-26.

The phrase “the hour has come” points to His understanding of the Father’s eternal purposes that are being accomplished through His life. This can also be seen in John 12:27-32 where Jesus surrenders to the Father’s hour as He prays. At this point, Jesus knew that the cross, the grave, the resurrection and ascension were before Him. He now asks the Father to complete this work as He prays for His own glorification in verses 1 and 5.⁷

“Glorification” is a rich concept in John and refers to the giving of proper esteem, position and honor. Jesus’ desire is that all would recognize who the Father was through His own glorification. The glorification of Jesus is linked to the threefold process of His crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. His act of obedience in surrendering to the cross allows for the completion of the work of the Christ beyond that event.

Tied to the glorification/exaltation of Jesus are the three “lifted up” sayings in John (John 3:14-1; John 8:28; John 12:32). The Father is glorified as the Son is lifted up on the cross, out of the grave and to the right hand of the Father—where he ever lives to make intercession for those who believe (see Hebrews 7:25). The Father is thus made known (glorified) as Jesus obeys and is lifted up. As the exaltation (ascension) of Jesus takes place, which Jesus also specifically prays toward in verse 5, the Spirit is sent and begins His work of drawing all people to the Father through the Son (John 12:32). The Holy Spirit also convicts the world concerning its need for the Christ (John 16:8). Thus, eternal life is made possible and given to all who know the Father through the Son (see John 1:2-3). As Jesus is glorified, the lost world is redeemed and the Father is ultimately made known and glorified. This is at the heart of our Savior’s prayer! Can the same thing be said of our praying?

His Followers and Their Mission (17:6-19)

Jesus is confident that the Father has heard His petitions regarding the completion of His mission because in verse 6 he transitions into a season of prayer for His disciples. Jesus knew the next few days were going to be difficult for even His most faithful followers. He also seeks to prepare them through prayer for their task after he is no longer with them. The disciples would soon be eyewitnesses to the Christ and bear witness to a pagan world on His behalf.

Jesus had already assured them of His provision for this time through the promise of the Spirit, His role as the True Vine and His instructions regarding praying in His name (John 14-16). He also knew that if they were going to be successful in taking the Gospel to their world they would need to walk with Him through His Father’s care and provision. What they needed was Christ-like character. This “character” would ensure adequate representation of Jesus to a lost world. In essence they needed to “be” the Gospel as they were “doing” and “telling” the Gospel.⁸

In verse 11 Jesus prays for His disciples to be kept in His name. The term “keep” refers to the concept of being guarded and relates more in this petition to the idea of being guarded in intimacy through

⁷These are not self-centered requests as we would often pray. Central to these petitions is the Father’s glorification—the moving forward of the mission through His vicarious suffering and victorious resurrection and ascension.

⁸Delos Miles expounds on this in his *Introduction to Evangelism* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 2003), 49.

personal relationship than it does to protection from danger from an outside source.⁹ This prayer refers to His desire that they be attached to Jesus the “True Vine” so that their hearts are focused personally and corporately on His heart (see John 15).

Jesus’ departure is fast approaching and His burden for them to remain in Him and focused on His mission is great. Jesus demonstrates with this prayer the importance of being dependent on the Father for a vibrant, real, and alive Christian witness. This petition also is applied to intimacy and oneness in community. The community must be kept together in His name to be the local expression of Christ to the pagan world they are seeking to reach.

Today’s culture needs to see genuine Christianity being lived out by Christ followers. This takes place as the Father “keeps” us in Jesus’ character and intimacy with Him. When that happens unbelievers are engaged by real Christians who are walking with a real Savior who can deliver them from the domain of darkness (see Col. 1:13-14).

In verse 15 Jesus prays for His followers to be kept from the “evil one.” He knows that protection from Satan, His deceptions and wiles can only take place through the Father. Jesus is concerned for His witnesses as He will soon be departing. He naturally does not want them to fall into temptation but be delivered from the devil and His evil influences.¹⁰ Satan is a thief and is out to steal and destroy every believer’s joy and testimony (see John 10:10).

Jesus understood that His disciples would fail if their ability to overcome evil was dependent on their own wisdom and strength. I am convinced that the mission creeps forward today because many Christians are being taunted, oppressed and deceived by the enemy. Living a godly life in holiness cannot take place apart from the work of God’s power as it is experienced through His Spirit. Spiritual warfare is real and prayer is key to believers’ ability to successfully say no to Satan’s temptations that come upon them. This is spiritual warfare prayer that is proactive.¹¹

In verse 17 Jesus prays for His followers to be sanctified (set apart) in His word (truth). If His witnesses are to have Christ’s character, their lives will need to be shaped and directed by the Word of God. Jesus

⁹ Although both are applicable the concept of protection for the sake of character related to intimacy and relationship (dative) is more understandable here while the latter idea of being protected from the enemy is addressed with His petition in John 17:17. Also, Borchert relates this “keeping” to the protecting power associated with the name of God which is an Old Testament theme seen in Ps. 54:1, 20:1 and Prov. 18:10. See Borchert, 196-197 for more discussion on this distinction.

¹⁰ It is interesting that Jesus, in response to the disciples question “Lord teach us to pray . . .” (Luke 11:1), teaches the church to pray for protection from the evil one in Matt. 6:13 and also prays the same thing here in John 17:15. This is evidently a very important prayer that believers should faithfully pray for one another. This focus also shows Jesus’ urgency in this type of specific prayer that recognizes the spiritual battle we are engaged in daily.

¹¹ Chuck Lawless correctly comments, “Most of our praying is reactive not proactive; that is, we start praying only after we learn of a losing battle (e.g., a family is in trouble, a young person is wondering, or a church is divided). The devil aims his arrows, hits his target—and then we decide to pray.” For more see Chuck Lawless, “Prayer and Spiritual Warfare” in *Give Ourselves to Prayer*, Dan R. Crawford, comp. (Terre Haute, IN: PrayerShop Publishing, 2008), 471.

prays specifically for their personal sanctification. “Truth” in John’s Gospel is representative of the “revelation of God in Jesus.”¹²

Also, in verse 19 Jesus makes reference to His own sanctification, which He accomplished so that His followers can be sanctified “in the truth.”¹³ This prayer refers to their life of obedience as they encounter the truth of God in the Christ and in His Word (see Jn. 14:6). When we pray for believers to be sanctified in the truth, we are praying for daily encounters with the living Christ, Who is Truth (Jn. 14:6). Jesus sanctified Himself through obedience and gave us truth in the living and active Word of God. These encounters should lead Christians to a life of radical obedience to the Truth.

Turner aptly comments, “the presupposition of the disciples’ full consecration is the death and exaltation of Jesus. Only with that, and the gift of the Paraclete to which it leads, can the disciples be kept in the name by which they were saved, and sanctified in the truth which they came to believe.”¹⁴ Thus, believers must be different or set apart if the pagan world is to believe that Jesus is the One who can give them eternal life. Intentional prayer is essential if this is to happen.

His Followers, Future Believers and the Moving Forward of the Kingdom (17:20-26)

Jesus now prays for His followers and for those who will believe in Him “through their word” (vs. 20). In essence, Jesus is praying for future generations of His followers who will believe through the disciples’ witness. He prays specifically for the leaders, and He is preparing the way for the moving forward of the mission through their lives. The impact on the world will be huge.

Two requests are central to this section. The first is for oneness (vs. 21). This is oneness that centers on the Father and the Son as they are one. Jesus is praying for unity that is experienced through the work of the Spirit and that focuses on intimacy and relationship. This is not unity that centers on temporal ideologies, methodological presuppositions, worship styles, attitudes or personal preferences. It is rather oneness that centers on the Father’s purposes and glory which takes place as believers unite their hearts together in His mission.

This prayer also aims at a unity with the Father through the Son (Jn. 14:6) and demonstrates the dependence that Christians have on Jesus in order to experience the love of the Father and be involved in His mission (Jn. 15:5).¹⁵ This prayer, according to Turner, “puts the Father’s glory at the centre, and spreads out in concentric circles of His will and purpose.”¹⁶ The result of this unity is that the mission moves forward as the world believes that the Father sent the Son (vs. 21).

¹² Lincoln, 167.

¹³ There is nothing about Jesus and His Character that needs sanctifying because He is perfect, yet His act of pleasing and obeying the Father is central to the act of sanctification. As He is set apart and completes His mission in obedience to the Father, the mission of His disciples to bear witness to the truth can likewise take place as they walk in obedience to being sent. For more on the continuity between the mission of Jesus and their mission as witnesses related to this prayer see Lincoln, 167-68.

¹⁴ Turner, 79.

¹⁵ For more on this see Morris, 733-34 and Turner, 80.

¹⁶ Turner, 80.

The second petition in this section is found in verse 24. Here Jesus prays toward His desire for His followers to be with Him. This is more than just a wish but something that He longs to see happen. This petition points toward eschatological notions of the experience of His future Glory. One day, when this life is over, Christians will experience the bliss of heaven with Jesus forever. However, one must not allow this prayer to be understood as just relating to the future blessing of heaven. It also relates to the present experience of His followers as they unite with Him in His mission.¹⁷ Eternal life is something believers experience in the present, thus allowing them to participate in the redemptive activity of His present glory at work in their world.¹⁸

This particular petition is profound in that the I am God of the Bible is praying for His followers to not only “behold” His powerful manifest presence in the future (i.e., His future glory) but to be present with Him in the midst of His eternal work of redeeming a fallen world unto Himself. The question the church has to answer today is, “Where is Jesus in your world?” Maybe one reason the Gospel is not running rapidly (see 2 Thess. 3:2) but creeping forward in North America is due to the fact that the Church is not praying to be with Jesus where He is at work in the lost world.

Three Prayer Patterns that Move the Mission Forward

Out of these discussions arise three prayer patterns that move the mission forward. The first is a focus on the Father. In this prayer, Jesus consistently points us back to the relationship aspect of Kingdom prayer with the Father, His glory, purposes and desires (e. g., John 17:1, 24). In addition, our relationship with the Father and the Son as it relates to unity among believers is essential. If our praying is to be missional and move the Kingdom forward their focus must begin, end and be permeated with the Father.

Second is a focus on being the gospel. Jesus prays toward his disciples and their character, protection and sanctification (e.g., Jn. 17:11, 15, 17). Being the gospel before a lost world makes it thirsty for the Christ we represent. When our Christian talk and walk are not congruent, we confuse the world about the Christ. Christians are dependent on the Father for protection from the enemy.

The last pattern is a focus on eternal/spiritual things. The result of the glorification of Jesus is eternal life for sinful man. Prayers that move the kingdom forward are those that focus on seeing: the lost saved, believers grow in the Father’s grace, and glorification of the Father as His followers join Him and experience His redemptive glory (Jn. 17:24). The church is making slow headway penetrating the darkness in North American because much of our praying is earthly, temporal and often focused on ourselves. This has to change!

Conclusion

In the previous pages we have identified various missional prayer patterns found in John 17. Admittedly, we have just scraped the surface of what is actually there. Hopefully, you have been challenged to examine your personal and corporate prayer experiences by Jesus and His prayer priorities and practices

¹⁷Borchert points out that although Jesus uses the phrase “where I am” in this prayer the focus is on experiencing and seeing His glory (Borchert, 208). There is also merit in studying the seven “I am” passages in John that precede this prayer as they relate to the element of being with Jesus (I am) wherever He is in this world.

¹⁸Glory in this context is representative of His manifest presence as it relates to the redemptive work of the Christ.

contained in this prayer. In light of the above discussion Stanley Grenz's comments in his work, *Prayer: A Cry for the Kingdom* seem appropriate as we conclude: "the challenge that we face today is the challenge to pray. Meeting this challenge requires that we cease merely talking about prayer and begin to pray. . . . Let us, therefore, pray. Let us invoke the in-breaking of the kingdom into the situations of life that we face. Let us cry for the Kingdom!"¹⁹

¹⁹Stanley J. Grenz, *Prayer: A Cry for the Kingdom*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005), 124.