

Chapter 17

The Gospel of John

At the end of Chapter 16, Jesus tells his disciples what he is talking about in a straightforward manner and without the use of metaphors. He is leaving them to go to the Father, from whence he came in the first place. The disciples are relieved and confess that they believe. However, Jesus knows that they will scatter when he is arrested, and they will leave him alone with his enemies. Nevertheless, Jesus also says that his Father will be with him. He will not be alone. He tells them these things, not to accuse them for their lack of faith, but so that they may have peace in him when the time of persecution arrives. That is, even though their lives in this world will be threatened, and even though their bodies may be harmed and their outward lives may fall apart, nevertheless he will be in them through the Holy Spirit, bringing renewal, hope, new life, and the assurance of God's presence. Inwardly they will be growing stronger, more confident, and even joyful, while outwardly things will not look good at all. The chapter ends by Jesus telling them that they will have courage because "I have conquered the world." The world may harm and even put them to death. But they are victors nevertheless, for nothing can take them out of the hands of God.

Chapter 17 is termed Jesus' "High Priestly Prayer."

First, Jesus prays that the Father may glorify him so that he may glorify the Father. It may seem puzzling that Jesus would speak of his humiliation before the world—dying on a cross for all to see—as a "glorification." But that is exactly what it is when you consider what it means. In this way, the Father presents the Son as the savior of the world. This glorifies both Father and Son because both are of one will in their desire to save, in their work of bringing divine life to the world such that the world and its inhabitants have an eternal and "glorious" future.

This is precisely what Jesus says to the Father in verse 2: "...You have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him." And then Jesus speaks plainly as to how this eternal life has its origin. "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

To "know God, and Jesus Christ..." is to have received the Spirit of God. Jesus is the external revelation and the very imprint of God the Father in the form of a human being. Externally, God revealed himself to the disciples in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. For us, Jesus comes in the form of the word and sacrament. This is the presence of God and his promises in an external sense. However, the goal of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ is to bring salvation: the gift of God's love and eternal life. And so in order that Jesus might convey the eternal life and love he came to give, the Holy Spirit enlivens Jesus in our hearts. In this way we experience who he is and what he gives through a reunification of ourselves with God in Christ and through the Spirit.

Jesus then turns in his prayer to the disciples themselves. He affirms that they belong to God, and that God gave them to Jesus so the words the Father gave him, he might give to them. They received these words in faith and therefore know that the Father sent the Son to them.

Jesus prays, not for the world but for them, that the Father may “protect” them in “Your name,” “so that they may be one as we are one.” It will be by sending the Spirit that God will protect them in God’s name and make them one with Father and Son. In other words, they will now have a share in the divine life of the Father and the Son. To be “one” is to live in union with God—the goal of salvation. For it is in our participation in divine life that we are saved for eternal life.

Jesus gathered them together first because they were chosen by God for this purpose. He guarded them in God’s word, and protected them from the world so that they might become fully God’s very own. The first purpose of gathering the disciples was not to turn them into messengers; they had to become God’s. Their time with Jesus was not merely a time for rote learning. It was a time for change and transformation. During their time with Jesus, they were undergoing spiritual formation. It was a process of growth and would culminate in rebirth when the Father sent the Holy Spirit after Jesus’ death and resurrection. Only then would they have been equipped to become Apostles ---those who were “sent” to proclaim a message.

Jesus expresses this change that took place in them by calling them “Yours,” (The Father’s) and by saying, “I have been glorified in them.” This change is a description of salvation itself. To be saved is to be “reconciled” with God. (Paul’s word) For John, that means union with the Savior, Jesus himself. Upon his glorification, he is not only with them. He is in them. He becomes their very life and by doing so, gives them the gift of divine life.

Jesus prays that, as he had protected them in “your name that you have given me” (that is, in Jesus’ name), he now asks that the Father will protect them, and that his joy may be theirs as well. Jesus’ joy is that of being one with the Father and therefore living in complete peace, security, love, and eternal life. To have these things is to have Jesus. To have Jesus is to have God. And to have God means that they no longer belong to the world. They now belong to God and his kingdom.

It is for this that they need to be protected. Jesus had protected all of them—except the one “destined” to be lost. This of course was Judas. Once again, we confront this conflict between God’s love for all and God’s providence that some are seemingly chosen to do evil. But as already mentioned, the evil itself serves God’s purposes. In the end, divine providence assumes control of the consequences of human behavior, even when it is evil.

Jesus then uses the word “sanctify.” This is another biblical word that points to the transformation that takes place in us as we receive Christ in the power of the Spirit. To be sanctified is to be perfected in the love of God. God’s love in Christ reshapes and reforms our hearts so that obeying God and loving God is something we desire. It is not a burden. God’s commands do not create a bad conscience due to our inability to obey. Rather, through sanctifying grace, obeying God becomes a pleasure, for we are reshaped in the image of Christ and empowered to love as he loves.

It is, therefore, as changed people that they are sent out into the world. Jesus is clear that he is not taking them out of the world. And for this reason, they need protection from “the evil one.” However, as sanctified people, their hearts are no longer entirely vulnerable to temptation. They will feel temptation while still in the world, but at the same time, they will have the power of God’s Spirit present in them to draw from. They are no longer like little children, immature and weak in their faith. Their faith lays hold of the presence of Christ himself. And as St. Augustine put it, this grace draws the human heart to God. God’s love and grace in Christ is far sweeter than anything the world might offer in its place. It fulfills us. It strengthens us. It makes us whole. It saves us from the fears, the emptiness, the worries, and the hopelessness that drives us to seek false gods. When we mature in God, when Christ lives in us through faith, when the Holy Spirit grants us the spiritual treasure that can only come to us from God, it becomes absurd and ridiculous to even consider replacing this with an idol.

The command to love God is total and complete so that our lives may become whole and complete. Only God’s love and grace in Christ perfectly fulfill our every desire, make us complete in joy, and preserve us for eternal life. This is what God wants for us and this is why he cannot tolerate any form of idolatry. To fall from God and into the arms of an idol is to fall from love and life. It is to “become lost.” Were this to happen to the Apostles, they would no longer be Apostles; they would no longer be in possession of the very grace they were sent to proclaim. For this reason, Jesus prays for them.

But he doesn’t stop with them. He then prays for all those who will come to believe in him through having heard the Gospel message; “...those who will believe in me through their word.” These too Jesus desires to come into unity with himself and the Father that they may be “with me where I am, to see my glory...” To see Jesus’ glory is to have been saved for eternal life, to have what is called “the beautiful vision.”

Jesus concludes his prayer by restating the purpose of his ministry and the good life itself. “...so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” The goal of life, and the meaning of salvation, is to become one with Christ and through Christ, with God.

It is important to realize that this perfection in sanctification—this process of becoming one with God in Christ, and through the Holy Spirit who comes to us in word and sacrament, does not happen during our lives in this world. We will never become perfectly able to obey God’s command to love him and our neighbor so long as we live in the world. This will happen only in God’s eschatological future—at the end of time

when the Kingdom of God comes in all its fullness. Until that time we live in hope of this perfection, not in its completion.

Therefore, the process of sanctification is also a matter of laying hold of God's forgiveness. Since we will never be without sin, that is, in perfect union with Christ, we will always be in need of forgiving grace as we pray in the Lord's prayer. We will always exist in a struggle with temptation, and our will to obey God will always be impaired so long as we live before the coming of the Kingdom.

So while we will be able to improve in our obedience, made possible by the grace of the Holy Spirit, at the same time we will also need to repent—return to God and ask for grace continually (as Luther noted first thing in his 95 theses.) The grace of sanctification is therefore the grace of forgiveness and the hope of the perfection in the life of the world to come.

Chapter 18 begins the story of Jesus' passion (suffering) across the Kidron Valley in the Garden of Gethsemane. While they are gathered there, that is, Jesus and his disciples, Judas brings a "detachment" of soldiers, together with police from the Jewish authorities. While they are carrying weapons, interestingly they assume a rather passive posture toward Jesus. Jesus has to take the initiative by coming forward and asking who they are looking for. This startles them so that he has to ask again.

John's portrayal of Jesus passion is such that he is pretty much in control of the whole thing. He demonstrates this yet again when Peter pulls out his sword and strikes the high priest's slave. "Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?" Jesus has no intention of trying to avoid crucifixion. In John's gospel, there isn't even a prayer that "this cup might be taken from me."