

John 17:6-12 What does Jesus pray for His Disciples?

Introduction

If you had to list say up to three things for your closest friends to pray for you. What would they be? Maybe this is something you do already? Charles Spurgeon once declared: 'Some brethren pray by the yard; but prayer is measured by weight, and not by length.' It is not the number of words we utter, rather the convictions of the heart in the One who is seeking God in prayer. The context of this prayer is important. It is the occasion of the Last Supper. In the context of that evening Jesus has delivered the teaching recorded in John chapters 13-16. This is, first of all, a lot of information. Secondly it is profound teaching on some very important subjects, and thirdly, it was also delivered at a significantly emotional time. Jesus, earlier in the evening has informed them that one of them would betray Him (John 13:18-30). Then they were told in no uncertain terms that: *where I am going you cannot come* (John 13:33). This statement was understood by the disciples to refer to His death, but there was still no comprehension of the timescale involved. They had no awareness at all that within the next few days Jesus would die, be buried, and have a marked tomb to confirm it.

Have you been in a situation where someone told you they had only a few days, weeks or months to live? Sadly, and inevitably, most of us can answer 'yes' to that question. Especially when it is a close family member or friend we feel the sense of pain and anguish in our hearts in an acute form. We may say words but what do you say that is adequate to the occasion. Many of us use a lot of words professionally in oral or written form and we can supply the required quantity most of the time with reasonable ease. However, in moments like this, they seem to be in exceedingly short supply because we are struggling to process the information provided. Our Lord gave some great words of assurance and challenge in these chapters before concluding this time with prayer. Given that we conclude meetings with prayer and sometimes less formal meetings of Christians as well it would have been surprising if Jesus had not closed their time in the Upper Room in prayer. The first part of the prayer concerned Himself and the immediate circumstances that lay ahead of Him and them. It was not the model of prayer He commended to the disciples (Matthew 6:5-15), where personal needs and wishes come some way down the list of prayer priorities, but here it was entirely natural and appropriate as He was the one who would shortly lay down His life on the cross. However, the majority of the prayer, John 17:6-19, had a primary reference to His disciples there in the Upper Room and who would become the first leaders of the Christian Church when it began later that same year. It is, therefore, entirely natural to ask what it is that Jesus chooses to pray for these men. After all it may give a pointer as to what He is praying for us at the present time in heaven. Jesus has two main aims in this prayer. The first recorded in John 17:6-12 is intercession for their security in the faith. *Protect them...* (John 17:11). The second topic of Jesus' prayer is for their personal holiness. *Sanctify them...* (John 17:17). If you were meeting with close friends and family members and praying for them one last time- on what subjects would you concentrate your prayer? This is a serious topic and one worthy of our attention. Too often we come to Scripture and read it in a way that is detached from its context, which can sometimes alter its significance for us. We must remember that this is not a general prayer to close a regular meeting. It is, by contrast, a farewell to Jesus' earthly ministry with the men who have accompanied Him from the beginning. In this context, therefore, Jesus' words take on added significance –for them and for us.

1. The Preparation of the Disciples (John 17:6-8)

(a) **We belong to the Father** (John 17:6) *I have revealed You to those whom You gave me out of the world. They were Yours; You gave them to Me and they have obeyed Your word.* (i) **By Creation** Paul reminded Greek Philosophers at Athens that it is *in [God] that we live and move and have our being* (Acts 17:28). Our being here is not an accident. This is a consistent biblical truth. Job 12:10 declares: *In His hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind.* This wonderful and reassuring truth is often ignored, forgotten or denied by many people in each generation. Daniel, the wonderful witness for God amongst the politicians and princes of the Babylonian and early Persian Empires, reminded the arrogant young king Belshazzar, that his short reign was about to come to an end because ***you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven.*** *You had the goblets from His temple brought to you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines drank wine from them. You praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand. But you did not honour the God who holds in His hand your life and all your ways* (Daniel 5:23). Paul in Romans 1:18-32 makes exactly the same point. This has serious implications for all kinds of moral issues. Someone who accepts the truth of Jesus' words here cannot but come to discussions about abortion, euthanasia, gay marriage, cloning, and a whole lot more of the ethical issues about which there is much debate today, with a different set of presuppositions to a person whose worldview is very different. What is often the case is that if we examine someone's worldview they usually come to consistent conclusions within that philosophical framework. The essential difficulty is that we do not share the basic perspective on the topic in question so often. Therefore, many ethical debates are very frustrating because there is no natural meeting place. Each side interprets, with good reason, the questionable conclusions of the other, forgetting very often that the basic ground rules are contested. This creation perspective undergirds all our ethical judgements. Recognising this problem can help to reduce our frustrations a little! (ii) **By Grace** Here the sovereignty of God is proclaimed in another respect, that of salvation. Ephesians 1:4 states: ***For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love*** ⁵***He predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will.*** This emphasis is repeated in Ephesians 1:11: ***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,*** ¹²***in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of His glory.*** How many people feel they don't belong? They have no sense of purpose or meaning to their lives and might also feel desperately lonely. The first disciples of Jesus certainly would feel that way over the next few days and we too have our difficult times. No believer will pass through the whole of life without having times when God seemed quite distant; our prayers appeared to be unanswered; our sense of purpose and direction turning to confusion; or our sense of 'get up and go' having gone without us! Maybe you are in one of these places just now? God wants to assure you that you belong to Him. For some of us we had no earthly Father in our lives at all; for others we had a father present but it was more of a negative than a positive experience; thankfully for the majority of people it is a great blessing to have felt a sense of belonging to an earthly Father. However, Jesus wanted to encourage His followers to grasp that they needed to also realise they belonged to a heavenly Father who loves us with a perfect and holy love. It is a love that genuinely wants the best for us at all times and knows what that is! Do you need to know or experience (once again?) the love of your heavenly Father?

(b) **They knew God the Father had sent Jesus** (John 17:7) *Now they know that everything You have given Me comes from You.* 'Who said...' – a common playground challenge. It is important to know whose authority lies behind a statement. It matters as much for adults as well as

children. Jewish people were fiercely monotheistic. Any hint of idolatry or misrepresentations of the oneness of God was viewed with great misgivings. In such a cultural context for the first disciples to understand who Jesus was took a great deal of explanation. It was particularly reassuring to know that Jesus had not come on His own authority, but that the Father was fully behind His mission in every respect. This was emphasised in John's Gospel especially. John 7:16: *Jesus answered, 'My teaching is not My own. It comes from the one who sent Me'*. In a passionate defence of His identity and calling in John 8 Jesus explained this point in detail to a hostile audience. ²⁵ *'Who are you?' they asked. 'Just what I have been telling you from the beginning,' Jesus replied.* ²⁶ *'I have much to say in judgment of you. But He who sent Me is trustworthy, and what I have heard from Him I tell the world.'* ²⁷ *They did not understand that He was telling them about His Father.* ²⁸ *So Jesus said, 'When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He and that I do nothing on My own but speak just what the Father has taught Me.* ²⁹ *The one who sent Me is with Me; He has not left Me alone, for I always do what pleases Him.'* ³⁰ *Even as He spoke, many believed in Him (John 8:25-30).* In the same address shortly afterwards Jesus repeated this point: *I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence...* (John 8:38a). He summarised this message in John 12:49-50. *For I did not speak on my own, but the Father who sent Me commanded Me to say all that I have spoken.* ⁵⁰ *I know that His command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told Me to say.'* Grasping this truth enabled His followers to have full confidence in Jesus –do you have such confidence in Him? It meant that His teaching had absolute authority over their lives. How does this fit with how you view Jesus' teaching?

(c) **Jesus told them what they needed to know** (John 17:8a) *For I gave them the words You gave Me and they accepted them.* Jesus can honestly say to His Father that I have passed on to My followers the things You wished Me to share with them. At that time it was the oral word. In a culture that prized memorisation disciples of a rabbi could recite almost word for word very long passages of their teaching. This was normal and no-one would have been surprised at this phenomenon. In our culture we know where to store or access information, but in a society where manuscripts were prohibitively expensive and ordinary people had no literature in their homes they had to memorise important things. In some cultures in the modern era this practice has continued. However, with the rise of the internet and other recent communications technology it is possible this may change. We have no excuse in this country with an abundance of Bible versions and easy access to God's Word. The question is this: are we soaking up God's truth and then seeking to make it known to other people? The first disciples did just that. We are the disciples of Jesus in this era and our calling is as important as theirs to both receive and pass on what Jesus has taught us. Christian discipleship is not a one-off course as a new believer but a way of life from conversion to the day we leave this life. At Sychar in Samaria Jesus had first spoke to a woman with a troubled life, but then to the wider community. John 4:42 records the amazing words summarising the convictions of these people after meeting with Jesus. *They said to the woman, 'We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and **we know that this man really is the Saviour of the world.**'* Praise the Lord that they got to that point. Have you grasped that conviction yet? The Lord has told us in His Word everything we need to know to live the Christian life. Do you need to grasp this reassurance today?

(d) **The Disciples believed it** (John 17:8b) *They knew **with certainty** that I came from You, and they believed that You sent Me.* They didn't just hear and remember Jesus' words in their minds. Instead, it had become deeply rooted in their hearts and lives with its fruitful implications. The Parable of the Sower recorded in the different Gospels, reminds us that people hear Jesus' message in different ways. Some people hear the words but allow them to vanish from their consciousness like the morning mist on a hot summer's day. Others hear the words and get initially very excited, but when the challenges and scepticism of a secular society are experienced, especially at the hands of family and friends who are not believers,

they step back considering it too high a price to pay. Other still lose focus over priorities forgetting to give the highest attention to that which is most important. However, there are also those whose lives are fruitful which produce a spiritual harvest (Mark 4:1-20). How are you hearing God's Word just now? What response does its teaching have on your life? Paul was overjoyed to write the words of I Thessalonians 2:13 because of the wonderful truth they conveyed. *And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.* It is God who uses His Word to change lives. He modelled it through the living Word, the Lord Jesus Christ (John 1:14) and to believers in subsequent generations through the Scriptures, by the power of His Spirit. When we pray for someone to come to faith and follow Jesus, it is the Holy Spirit who works in their lives to draw them to faith and to assist them to understand the Gospel. Jesus in John 16:13-15 summarises the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of God's people. *But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on His own; He will speak only what He hears, and He will tell you what is yet to come.* ¹⁴ **He will glorify Me because it is from Me that He will receive what He will make known to you.** ¹⁵ *All that belongs to the Father is Mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from Me what He will make known to you.* It is the Spirit that opens our minds so that we come to faith; it is the Spirit that enables and empowers us to grow in our faith; it is the Spirit who equips us to share our faith. If the Gospel is the good news that we claim it is then it is too good to keep for ourselves- we must pass it on. Is that your conviction today? The only question then is how to do so?

(e) **The Disciples kept it** (John 17:6b) *and they have obeyed your word.* At this stage they could not do what they would later do after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. This is important to note. You will have things you can do later that you don't have the resources to accomplish now. God's Holy Spirit grants us the spiritual resources to accomplish this goal. Here the disciples valued the teaching of Jesus. The Psalmist in Psalm 119:162 declared: *I rejoice in Your word like one who discovers a great treasure* (NLV). Do we get as excited by what we find in God's Word as the other interests we have in life? If we are honest the answer is sometimes 'yes' and sometimes 'no'. The Psalmist goes further and suggests that his pleasure and delight is on a par with someone who has obtained something they have wished for over the years. However, Jesus is rejoicing that these followers have gone a stage further in obedience to God's Word. This is a test of their and our profession of faith. Earlier that evening Jesus had stated: *'If you love Me, keep My commands* (John 14:15). Shortly afterwards He underlined this point in John 14:21: *Whoever has My commands and keeps them is the one who loves Me. The one who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them.'* If that wasn't clear enough moments later Jesus said: *Anyone who loves Me will obey My teaching. My Father will love them, and We will come to them and make Our home with them.* ²⁴ *Anyone who does not love Me will not obey My teaching. These words you hear are not My own; they belong to the Father who sent Me* (John 14:23-24). In the light of the revelation of God entrusted to them the disciples had honoured Jesus by obeying His Word. If Jesus was praying here with respect to you or me, or this Church, could He also say these words of us in the light of the revelation entrusted to us?

2. **The Preservation of the Disciples** (John 17:9-12)

(a) **For whom is He praying?** (John 17:9) *I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those You have given Me, for they are Yours.* Our security is in Christ through our union with Him by faith. The quality of our communion or fellowship with Him varies over time

depending on the level of success we have in the battle over temptation to sin and our responses by faith to the challenges of life. What a wonderful thing as a child of God to know that Jesus is praying for you. The Bible indicates to us that God the Father is always attentive to the requests of His beloved Son Jesus. This is made plain by Jesus' words at the graveside of His friend Lazarus in John 11:41-42: *Jesus looked up and said, 'Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. ⁴²I knew that You always hear Me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that You sent Me.'* In context, Jesus told the large crowd that if they believed they would see the glory of God (John 11:40b) revealed through what would take place that day. Jesus then indicated that the events that would unfold would serve as a proof that the Father always hears and answers His prayers. Given that the circumstances concerned an indisputably dead man whose earthly remains had already begun to decompose, it was a remarkable statement to make. The fact that after Jesus' prayer and command the dead man was restored to full health and walked out of His own grave would remain with all those people present for the rest of their lives. These men were there and saw the vindication of Jesus in the restoration of Lazarus. Jesus' words, although directly applicable in the first instance to the people in the upper room, are by implication also words of assurance for us as well. Jesus is praying for you- if you are one of His followers. Are these words of encouragement or reassurance you need to hear at this time?

Jesus is no longer physically in the world but is in heaven praying for us. The devil will tempt and seek to discourage us not to follow Jesus and to condemn us when we fail. In response Paul assured the Romans: *Who then will condemn us? No one—for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and He is sitting in the place of honour at God's right hand, **pleading for us.** ³⁵ Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean He no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? ³⁶(As the Scriptures say, "For your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep." ³⁷No, despite all these things, **overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.** ³⁸ And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. ³⁹ No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:34-39 NLV). Other references to the prayer life of Jesus in heaven include Hebrews 7:24-25: ²⁴ but because Jesus lives for ever, He has a permanent priesthood. ²⁵ **Therefore He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them.** What wonderful news this is. Nothing is too big or too small for God with respect to your life. Remember Romans 11:29: *God's gifts and His call are irrevocable.* Hallelujah! I hope this encourages you to keep praying for people you know who need to come to faith; who need to be restored to faith or who are going through tough times as a Christian.*

(b) **For what is He praying?** (John 17:10-11) ¹⁰ *All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. ¹¹ I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, **protect them** by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so **that they may be one as we are one.*** It is extraordinary that Jesus declares here that *glory has come to me through them* (v10). Their comprehension of His identity and mission followed by attitudes and behaviour on many subsequent occasions fell well short of the ideal. The Gospels are very honest about that. Yet despite their weaknesses and failings Jesus declares that He and by implication the Father has been glorified through them. In fact in His message and prayer that evening (in John 13-17) Jesus mentioned glory sixteen times (according to W. Wiersbe, *Prayer*, p. 79). He had glorified the Father (17:4); they had glorified Him (17:10) and in 17:22 there is the extraordinary petition for the future guaranteed glory of His followers in Him—expressed in the same way as Paul in Romans 8:30). Jesus here asks the Father to protect His followers from having a divisive spirit- 'The my way or the highway!'

approach. Western Christianity since the eighteenth century so-called 'enlightenment' has increasingly celebrated individualism at the expense of community; of emphasising personal preferences at the expense of the common good. It has reached epidemic proportions in the twentieth century. We come to faith in Christ as individuals, but we become part of the Church, both in its local expression and universal extent. The Lord was concerned that after His departure to heaven that there might be difficulties that might lead to disunity and division in the Early Church. In the midst of all the trials they would experience in these formative years a spirit of divisiveness would be a serious obstacle to numerical and spiritual growth. His prayer for them, recorded in John 17:11 is extraordinary. Notice the standard of unity for which He was praying in their midst. It is that which is a given in the Trinity in heaven! *Holy Father, **protect them** by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so **that they may be one as we are one.*** The New Testament assumes this principle. Ephesians 4:3-5 states: *Make every effort **to keep** the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.* ⁴*There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called;* ⁵*one Lord, one faith, one baptism;* ⁶*one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.* A truly Spirit-filled follower of Jesus in the first century AD was one that welcomed all who professed faith in His name; a party spirit was unwelcome (I Corinthians 1:10-17); a truly Spirit filled believer demonstrated their love for other Christians in practical care as a witness to the world (John 13:34-35); a truly Spirit-filled believer would rejoice to share fellowship with brothers and sisters in Christ at His Table, regardless of ethnic or social class backgrounds, or without allowing differences over secondary matters to prevent this demonstration of our unity in Christ. The challenge two millennia later to us in application is how generous and gracious are we not just with fellow believers in our own congregation, but with other Christian Churches in applying and living out these principles. Are we willing to think the best of others, forgive past failures and look forward with the grace of Christ to the future potential each one of us has in service for the Lord? This is the one test Jesus has given people outside the church to test the genuineness of our claims to be His followers.

(c) **How successful is His prayer?** (John 17:12) ¹²*While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled.* In John 6:39-40 Jesus declared: *And this is the will of Him who sent Me, **that I shall lose none of all those He has given Me**, but raise them up at the last day.* ⁴⁰*For My Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.'* This exception was Judas, to whom Jesus referred in John 6:70: *Have I not chosen you the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!* Sadly in later generations others also made choices like Judas. John wrote in I John 2:19 of a number of people he had known: *They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.* What is important here is the success of the work of Jesus. The Church for which He laid down His life will be saved, both in time and for eternity. Praise the Lord! He didn't die to make salvation possible but *to save His people from their sins* (Matthew 1:21b). In Christ we are saved and secure, but with an obligation to live in a manner consistent with the prayer of Jesus, for His name's sake, Amen.