

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
17:1-8

1. Jesus spoke these words, lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son also may glorify you, 2. as you have given him power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as you have given him. 3. And this is life eternal, that they might know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. 4. I have glorified you on the earth. I have finished the work which you gave me to do. 5. And now, O Father, glorify me together with yourself, with the glory which I had with you before the world was. 6. I have manifested your name to the men whom you gave me out of the world; they were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. 7. Now they have known that all things which you have given me are from you. 8. For I have given to them the words which you gave me; and they have received *them*, and have known surely that I came forth from you; and they have believed that you sent me.

1.--[*Jesus spoke these words.*] The chapter we have now begun is the most remarkable in the Bible. It stands alone, and there is nothing like it. A few introductory remarks will not be out of place.

Henry remarks that this was a prayer after sermon, a prayer after sacrament, a family prayer, a parting prayer, a prayer before a sacrifice, a prayer that was a specimen of Christ's intercession.

We have here the only long prayer of the Lord Jesus, which the Holy Ghost has thought good to record for our learning. That He often prayed we know well; but this is the only prayer reported. We have many of His sermons, parables, and conversation, but only this prayer.

We have here the prayer of one who spoke as never man spoke, and prayed as never man prayed--the prayer of the second Person in the Trinity to the Father; the prayer of one whose office it is, as our High Priest, to make intercession for His people.

We have a prayer offered up by the Lord Jesus on an especially interesting occasion: just after the Lord's Supper, just after a most striking discourse, just before His betrayal and crucifixion, just before the disciples forsook Him and fled, and just at the end of His earthly ministry.

We have here a prayer that is singularly full of deep and profound expressions; so deep, indeed, that we have no line to [fathom] them. The wisest Christian will always confess that there are things here that he cannot fully explain.

The Bible reader who attaches no weight to such considerations as these must be in a very strange state of mind.

Augustine remarks: "The prayer that Christ made for us, He has also made known to us. Being so great a Master, not only what He says in discoursing to the disciples but also what He says to the Father in prayer for them is their edification."

Calvin remarks: "Doctrine has no power unless efficacy is imparted to it from above. Christ holds out an example to teachers not to employ themselves only in sowing the Word, but by mingling prayers with it, to implore the assistance of God, that His blessing may render their labor fruitful."

Bullinger remarks that it was the duty of the Jewish priest to pray for the people as well as to offer sacrifice for them.

About the place where this prayer was offered, we know nothing certain. Some, as Alford, have conjectured that it was in the upper room where the Lord's Supper was held. This, however, seems inconsistent with "Arise, let us go hence" (14:31). It seems more likely that it was prayed in some quiet place outside the walls, before our Lord "crossed the brook Cedron" (John 18:1). One thing at least is almost certain: it is a totally different prayer from that which our Lord prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane (although Rupertus asserts it was the same).

About the hearers of this prayer, there seems no reason to doubt that all the eleven apostles were present and all heard it. All heard the discourses of the last three chapters, and I cannot see why all should not have heard the concluding prayer.

About the general plan, order, and arrangement of the prayer, I decline to express any opinion, thinking it more reverent not to define too closely such a matter. We can all see at a glance that our Lord prays about himself, prays about the disciples, and prays about those who were to be disciples afterward. But it is best to pause here and not to dissent and analyze and systematize too minutely such a prayer. One thing only may be remarked, and that is, the singular frequency with which "the world" is mentioned. The phrase occurs no less than nineteen times.

I conclude these introductory observations by advising all who wish to study thoroughly this wonderful chapter of Scripture, to consult, if they can, the following works specially devoted to the elucidation of it: "Manton's Sermons on Seventeenth John," (400 folio pages); George Newton's Exposition of Seventeenth John," (560 pages); and "Burgess's Expository Sermons on Seventeenth John," (700 pages). These three books, having been written by Puritans 200 years ago, are ignored by some and despised by others. I simply venture the remark that he who cares to examine them will find that they richly repay perusal. Manton's work especially will bear a comparison with anything written on this chapter since his days. It is curious that the other prayer, commonly called the "Lord's Prayer," has been frequently made the subject of books and expositions, while this much larger "prayer" has been comparatively little handled.

Melancthon says: "There is no voice that has ever been heard, either in

heaven or earth, more exalted, more holy, more fruitful, more sublime than this prayer.

Luther says: "In proportion as this prayer sounds plain and simple, it is in reality deep, rich, and wide--that which none can fathom."

[*Lifted up his eyes to heaven.*] This sentence shows that bodily gestures in prayer and worship of God are not altogether to be overlooked as unmeaning. There is a decent and reverent manner and gesture that suits the action of addressing God. It also seems clearly to show that the prayer was prayed before witnesses. John writes as one describing what he saw and heard. It is perhaps too much to say that the expression proves the prayer to have been in the open air. A person may look upward and heavenward even in a room. Yet it certainly rather increases the probability that our Lord was in the open air.

Calvin says: "If we desire to imitate Christ, we must take care that our outward gestures do not express more than is in our mind, but that inward feeling shall direct the eyes, the hands, the tongue, and everything about us."

Newton observes that gesture and demeanor in God's worship, though not everything, are something.

[*And said, Father, the hour has come.*] The "hour" here named is the hour appointed in God's eternal counsels for the sacrifice of the death of Christ and the final accomplishment of His atonement. That time, which had been promised by God and expected by saints for 4000 years, ever since Adam's fall, had at length arrived; and the seed of the woman was actually about to bruise the serpent's head by dying as man's Substitute and Redeemer. Up to this night, "the hour was not yet come" (John 7:30, 8:20), and until it had come, our Lord's enemies could not hurt Him. Now, at last, the hour had come, and the Sacrifice was ready.

Augustine says here: "Time did not force Christ to die, but Christ chose a time to die. So also the time at which He was born of the Virgin He settled with the Father, of whom He was begotten without time."

Let us remember, though in a far lower sense, that believers are all immortal till their hour is come; and till then, they are safe and cannot be harmed by death.

Let us note how our Lord addresses God as "Father." In a lower sense we may do the same, if we have the Spirit of adoption and are His children in Christ. The Lord's prayer teaches us to do so.

It is worth notice that our Lord uses the phrase "Father" six times in this one prayer.

[*Glorify your Son...glorify you.*] I think the meaning of this sentence must be this: "Give glory to Your Son, by carrying Him through the cross and the grave, to a triumphant completion of the work He came to do, and by placing Him at Your right hand, and highly exalting Him above every name

that is named. Do this, in order that He may glorify You and Your attributes. Do this, that He may bring fresh glory to Your holiness, and justice, and mercy, and faithfulness, and prove to the world that You are a just God, a holy God, a merciful God, and a God who keeps His word. My vicarious death and my resurrection will prove this and bring glory to You. Finish the mighty work. Glorify Me, and in so doing glorify Yourself. Finish Your work, not least, that Your Son may glorify You by bringing many redeemed souls to heaven, to the glory of Your grace."

Stier remarks: "These words prove the Son is equal to the Father, as touching His Godhead. What creature could stand before his Creator and say, 'Glorify Me, that I may glorify You?'"

The glory of God and His attributes is the grand end of all creation and of all God's arrangements and providences. Nothing brings such glory to God as the completion of the redeeming work of Christ by His death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. Our Lord seems to me to ask that His death may at once take place, that He through death may be taken up to glory, and that there the justice, holiness, mercy, and faithfulness of the Father may be glorified and exhibited to all creation, and many souls be at once saved and glorify the Divine wisdom and power.

Augustine remarks: "Some take the Father's glorifying the Son to consist in this--that He spared Him not, but delivered Him up for us all. But if He be said to be glorified by passion, how much more by resurrection? For in the passion it is more His humility than His glory that is shown forth, as the Apostle says in Phil. 2:7-11."

2.--[*As you have given him power, etc.*] The Greek of part of this verse is peculiar as it contains a nominative absolute, and a literal translation seems impossible. It would be, "That with regard to all that body or thing which You have given Him, He should give eternal life to them." There seems a distinction between the whole body and the particular individual members. The body is given to Christ, in the mass, from all eternity. The members of that body are called in time, separately and one-by-one, and eternal life given to them.

There certainly seems a connection between this verse and the concluding clause of the preceding verse. "Let Your Son glorify You by saving souls, even as You have appointed He should do, seeing that You have given Him power and authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all the members of that mystical body which You have given Him."

When we read here of "the Father giving power to the Son," we must carefully remember that it is not the giving by a superior to an inferior. It signifies that arrangement in the counsels of the eternal Trinity by which the Father gives to the Son especially the carrying out of the work of redemption. Newton thinks the "power" includes the dignity of judgment at the last day, as in John 5:22.

The expression "all flesh" seems to me, as it does to Augustine, Bullinger, Newton, and others, to denote all mankind. All are not saved, but Christ has power and authority over all. Some confine it to the "elect," but I

cannot see the force of their argument. To my eyes it is like John 3:16, where "world" and "believers" are in contradistinction. So it seems here--"all flesh" and "given ones."

Chrysostom thinks that the phrase "all flesh" had special reference to the calling of the Gentiles into the Church, and that our Lord meant that henceforward He was to be "Savior of Gentiles as well as Jews."

The phrase "eternal life" includes everything that is necessary to the complete salvation of a soul--the life of justification, sanctification, and final glory.

The Son gives "eternal life" to none but those who are "given to Him" in the everlasting counsels of the Trinity, from all eternity. Who these are man cannot say. "Many of the *given* ones," says Traill, "do not for a long time know it. All are invited to repent and believe, without distinction. No one is warranted in saying, "I was not given to Christ and cannot be saved." But that the last day will prove that none are saved except those given to Christ by the Father, is clear and plain.

Poole remarks: "We need not ascend up to heaven to search the rolls of the eternal counsels. All whom the Father has given to Christ shall come to Christ, and not only receive Him as Priest, but give themselves up to be ruled and quickened by Him. By such a *receiving* of Christ, we shall know whether we are of the number of those that are *given* to Christ."

Traill remarks: "This giving of men to the Son to be redeemed and saved is the same thing with election and predestination."

"There is a twofold giving of men to the Son by the Father. One is eternal, in the purpose of His grace; and this is mainly meant here. The other is in time, when the Father by His Spirit draws men to Christ. (John 6:44.) All the elect are given from eternity to the Son, to be redeemed by His blood; and all the redeemed are in due time drawn by the Father to the Son, to be kept to eternal life."

3.--[*And this is life eternal, etc.*] This verse is mercifully given to us by our Lord as a description of saved souls. "The secret of possessing eternal life--of being justified and sanctified now and glorified hereafter--consists simply in this: in having a right saving knowledge of the one true God and of that Jesus Christ whom He has sent to save sinners." In short, our Lord declares that he who rightly knows God and Christ is the man who possesses eternal life.

Of course, we must distinctly understand that mere head-knowledge, like that of the devil, is not meant by our Lord in this verse. The knowledge He means is a knowledge that dwells in the heart and influences the life. A true saint is one who "knows the Lord." To know God on the one hand--His holiness, His purity, His hatred of sin--and to know Christ on the other hand--His redemption, His mediatorial office, His love to sinners--are the two grand foundations of saving religion.

Right knowledge, after all, lies at the root of all vital Christianity, as

light was the beginning of creation. We need to be "renewed in knowledge" (Col. 3:10). We must know what we believe, and we cannot properly worship an unknown God. The two great questions to be considered are, Do we know God and do we know Christ aright? God known out of Christ is a consuming fire and will fill us with fear only. Christ known without God will not be truly valued; we shall see no meaning in His Cross and passion. To see clearly at the same time a holy, pure, sin-hating God and a living, merciful, sin-atoning Christ is the very ABC of comfortable religion. In short, it is life eternal to know rightly God and Christ. "To know God without Christ," says Newton, "is not to know Him savingly."

Traill remarks: "The secret moth and poison in many people's religion is that it is not Christianity at all. God out of Christ is a consuming fire. God not worshipped in Christ is an idol. All hopes of acceptance out of Christ are vain dreams. A heaven out of Christ is little better than the Turk's paradise."

The Greek of the phrase "that they might know," would have been better rendered "to know." It is the same phrase that is so rendered in John 4:34: "My meat is to do the will." Literally this is, "My meat is that I may do the will."

Let us learn that knowledge is the chief thing in religion, though we must not make it an idol. Most wicked men are what they are because they are ignorant. Godly people are often described in Scripture by one single phrase: "They know God."

The argument that Arians and Socinians have always loved to found on this verse appears to me extremely weak. Their idea, that our Lord did not lay claim to divinity because He speaks of the Father as the "only true God," is foolish and unreasonable. Chrysostom, Cyril, Toletus, and others remark very sensibly that the word "only" was not meant to exclude the Son and the Holy Ghost, but only those idols and false gods with which the heathen religions had filled the earth when Christ appeared. The very fact that eternal life consists in knowing not only God, but Christ, goes far to prove Christ's divinity.

Manton remarks that the expression in this verse had a two-fold object: firstly, to exclude the idols and false gods, and secondly, to show the order and economy of salvation.

Let us note that this is the only place in the New Testament where our Lord calls Himself "Jesus Christ."

4.--[*I have glorified You on the earth.*] The meaning of these words I take to be this: "I have now glorified You during my life on earth by keeping Your law perfectly (so that Satan can find no defect or blemish in Me), by witnessing faithfully to Your truth in opposition to the sins and false teaching of the Jews, and by showing You and Your mind towards man in a way that was never known before."

[*I have finished the work...to do.*] The meaning of these words I take to be this: "I have completed the work of redemption, which You sent me into

the world to accomplish, my death and resurrection being so near that to all intents and purposes it is finished."

On the use of the past tense here instead of the future, Augustine remarks: "Christ says He *has* finished that which He most surely knows He *will* finish. Thus long before in prophecy, he used verbs of past tense, when that which He said was to come to pass after many years. 'They pierced,' says He, 'my hands and my feet;' not they will pierce." (Psalm 22:16.)

It has been truly remarked that Christ alone, of all born of woman, could say literally, "I have finished the work You gave Me to do." He did what the first Adam failed to do, and what all the saints in every age fail to do. He kept the law perfectly, and by so keeping it brought in everlasting righteousness for all them that believe. Yet here is the model we ought to keep before our eyes continually. We must aim to finish the work our Father appoints for us, whether great or small.

Musculus remarks that true godly obedience is to be seen not merely in doing such work as we arbitrarily take up, but in doing such work as God appoints us to do.

It admits of doubt whether there is not a latent reference in the end of this verse to Daniel's prophecy, that Messiah would "finish transgression, make an end of sins, make reconciliation for iniquity, and bring in everlasting righteousness" (Dan. 9:24).

Let it be carefully noted that Christ's redeeming work on earth was "work that the Father gave Him to do." He was the Person commissioned in the counsels of the everlasting Trinity to do this work.

"On the earth" must include the whole period of Christ's incarnation, from His birth until His ascension. During all that period He glorified the Father by perfect unvarying holiness.

5.--[*And now, O Father, etc.*] Having briefly recited His work on earth, or, as it were, rendered an account of His ministry, our Lord now repeats the one prayer with which He began: "Glorify Me." The meaning of this verse I take to be as follows: "Father, my earthly work being now finished, I ask to be restored to that heavenly glory which in an unspeakable manner I had with You, as one of the co-equal and undivided Trinity, long before this world existed. The period of my humiliation and self-imposed weakness being accomplished, let Me once more share Your glory, and sit with You on Your throne as I did before my incarnation."

It is needless to say that the things asked in this prayer both here and elsewhere are very deep and reach far beyond man's understanding. The glory which the Son had with the Father, in the time before the creation of the world, is a matter passing our comprehension. But the pre-existence of Christ, the doctrine that Father and Son are two distinct persons, and the equal glory of the Father and the Son are, at any rate, taught here very plainly. It seems perfectly impossible to reconcile the verse with the Socinian theory that Christ was a mere man, like David or Paul, and did not exist before He was born at Bethlehem.

Let us also learn the practical lesson, that a prayer for glory comes best from those who have done work upon earth for God. A lazy wish to go to glory without working is not according to Christ's example.

6.--[*I have manifested Your name.*] In this part of the prayer our Lord begins to speak of His believing people--directly of the eleven apostles but indirectly and partially of all believers in every age. And the rest of the prayer from this point is entirely taken up with the case of the disciples.

The sentence before us means, "I have made known Yourself, Your character, and Your attributes to my disciples." The word "name" is continually used in this sense in the Bible. Thus: Psalm 22:22, 52:9, 119:55, Isa. 26:8, Acts 9:14, Prov. 18:10. A right knowledge of God the Father was the first thing that Christ revealed and taught to His disciples.

Burgon remarks: "The word *name* is here used in that large signification, so well known to readers of Scripture, whereby it is made to stand for God himself. (Psalm 20:1.) The evangelist says, 'They shall call His name Emmanuel,' meaning that our Savior would be what the name Emmanuel means: viz., God with us. As often thus as our Lord made known to men the mind and will of the eternal Father, so often did He manifest His name."

Traill remarks: "What is the Father's name? Many think they know it, to whom Christ never revealed it. If you ask them whether they know Christ's Father's name, they have a ready answer. He is the first Person in the Trinity. He is the Almighty, the maker and ruler of heaven and earth. Yes, but this is the name of God only, and that in general! The name of Christ's Father is that name and discovery of God wherein He stands related to the Son."

[*To the men...you gave them to Me.*] In this sentence our Lord describes His disciples. He calls them "men whom the Father gave Him out of the world--men who were the elect children of the Father, and whom the Father committed and entrusted to His care as to a good Shepherd." Lampe thinks that "men" are emphatically mentioned here to the seclusion of angels.

Believers are "given" to Christ by the Father, according to an everlasting covenant made and sealed long before they were born, and taken out from the world by the calling of the Spirit in due time. They are the Father's peculiar property as well as the property of the Son. They were of the world and nowise better than others. Their calling and election out of the world to be Christ's people, and not any foreseen merit of their own, is the real foundation of their character.

These are deep things. They are to be read with peculiar reverence because they are the words of the Son addressed to the Father, and handling matter about believers that the Eternal Trinity alone can handle with positiveness and certainty. Who those are who are given to Christ by the Father, we can only certainly know by outward evidences. But that all believers are so given by the Father, predestined, elect, chosen, called by an everlasting covenant, and their names and exact number known from all eternity, is

truth that we must reverently believe and never hesitate to receive. So long as we are on earth we have to do with invitations, promises, commands, evidences, and faith; and God's election never destroys our responsibility. But all true believers, who really repent and believe and have the Spirit, may fairly take comfort in the thought that they were known and cared for and given to Christ by an eternal covenant, long before they knew Christ or cared *for* Him. It is an unspeakable comfort to remember that Christ cares for those whom the Father has given Him.

[*And they have kept Your word.*] Here our Lord continues the description of His disciples and names things about them which may be seen by men as well as God. He says, "They have kept (or observed, or attended to) the Word of the Gospel which You did send them by Me. While others would not attend to or keep that Word, these eleven men had hearing ears and attentive hearts and diligently obeyed Your message." Practical obedience is the first great test of genuine discipleship.

7.--[*Now they have known, etc.*] In this verse our Lord proceeds to give an account of His disciples. The meaning seems to be: "They have now attained such a degree of knowledge that they know the words they have heard and the works they have seen from Me are words and works given Me to speak and do by You."

The idea is that they know my mission to be divine. "They know that You have sent Me to be the Messiah, and have commissioned Me to speak and act as I have done."

Here, as elsewhere, it is striking to observe how Jesus dwells on a right knowledge of the Father as the great truth which He came into the world to reveal.

8.--[*For I have given...which you gave Me.*] In this sentence our Lord declares what He had done in teaching His disciples. He had given them the words (doctrines or truth) that the Father had given Him to proclaim to the world. The words that our Lord spoke and the works that He did were both alike given Him by the Father to speak and to do, in the eternal counsels of the Trinity, about man's salvation.

For the peculiar use of the phrase "words" to denote the truths or doctrines taught by our Lord, see John 3:34, 6:68, 12:48, and 14:10. Specially we should remark Peter's saying, "You have the words of eternal life."

[*They have received, etc.*] Our Lord here declares three remarkable things about His disciples. They had willingly received and embraced the truths He brought them from the Father. They had known and acknowledged that their Master came from God the Father. They believed and were persuaded that the Father sent Him to be the Messiah. And all this had taken place when the vast majority of their countrymen neither acknowledged nor believed anything of the kind.

We should carefully note the high character given to the disciples by our Lord. It seems wonderful, at first sight (when we remember their many

defects in faith and knowledge), that our Lord should commend them for "knowing" and "believing." Yet when we think of their immensely difficult position and the opposition they had to meet, we shall see it was no light matter to believe at all. It is, after all, a very comfortable reflection that our Lord does not despise weak grace, and that He honors reality and sincerity of faith although it may be very small. Believers make a better appearance in heaven than they do upon earth.

The word rendered "surely" is literally "truly." It is translated "surely" in Matt. 26:73 and Mark 14:70. The idea is, "They have known for a sure and undoubted truth."

Manton observes: "The faith of the Apostles was weak. They had but a confused view of Christ's Godhead and eternal generation. They knew little of His death, were filled with the thought of a terrene kingdom and a pompous Messiah, and understood not His prediction of His death and passion. Though they knew Him to be the Redeemer and Savior of the world, yet the manner of His death and passion they knew not. 'We trusted that it had been He who should have redeemed Israel.' Yet observe how Christ commends their weak faith! Certainly He loves to encourage poor sinners when He praises their mean and weak beginnings."

Traill observes: "Christ tells all the good He can of His disciples, and covers their failings. How poorly had they received Christ's Word. How weak and staggering was their faith. How oft had Christ reproved them sharply for their unbelief and other faults. Yet not a word of all this in Christ's representing them to His Father! This is the constant, gracious way of our High Priest. He makes no mention of His Israel's faults in heaven, but for their expiation."