

The Lord's Greatest Prayer, Part 4

We find ourselves in the 17th chapter of John. This is early on Friday morning of Passion Week. In the darkness of the morning hours before dawn, our Lord has around Him the eleven disciples. Judas has already left to launch the betrayal that will take place in just a very brief time, after which our Lord being arrested, will go through a mock trial; and on Friday, will be crucified; on Sunday, rise from the dead.

But we are still deep into the darkness of early Friday morning. Our Lord has been spending the whole evening giving promises to the disciples. They are recorded for us in John 13, 14, 15, and 16. They are promises of blessing, promises of persecution, all kinds of promises. But the greatest promise of all is that He will send the Holy Spirit to provide the fulfilment of all His promises, and to be the power they need to serve Him and witness for Him in the world.

What we have then in John 17 is a prayer prayed by our Lord. This is actually the Lord's Prayer. He stops on the way toward the garden of Gethsemane in the dark of the night, still surrounded by the eleven disciples, and He prays this prayer in which He asks the Father on behalf of the disciples and all who will ever believe, to bring them to the fullness of the promised salvation. It is the only glimpse in Scripture of what we call the intercessory work of Christ, the much more work, the mediatorial work of Christ where He mediates for His own. It is an example of what our Lord is doing now, what He ever lives to do, and that is to make intercession for His own.

Paul says in Romans that "He died for us, providing the sacrifice for sin in which He paid the penalty for our sins. But much more, He lives for us. He lives before the Father, ever-living to make intercession for us, so that nothing overpowers us, overcomes us, and we all are brought to eternal glory." This is the much more work. You have a glimpse of it here. Literally in this chapter, we are brought into the heavenly Holy of Holies where the Son comes before His Father on behalf of His own. Let me give you a little bit of a background to understanding this.

You remember the exodus from Egypt in the history of Israel, and you remember that when they came out of Egypt and they arrived in the wilderness, they were there for forty years, and they basically were wanderers for those forty years living in tents. They would stop and pitch their tents, and they would be arranged around another tent. They would be arranged around a larger tent. It was a large tent in the centre. That was God's tent. Around that were the twelve tribes and God was in the centre. God's tent was the largest tent and the one to which they focused their attention. It represented the presence of God.

In the middle of that tent – called also the tabernacle – there was a small tent right in the centre of the tabernacle, and it was called the Holy of Holies. It symbolised the presence of God. In that Holy of Holies, that small tent inside the large tent, was the ark of the covenant; and on top of it, the mercy seat. Now, that was forbidden for anyone to enter. The presence of God was not accessible to the people, except for once a year, one day when one person could enter to that Holy of Holies. That was on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur; and the man who could enter was the high priest. He would take with him two things. He would take with him the blood of the animal sacrifice to be poured out on the altar, and he would take with him incense, symbolising prayer. His responsibility on the Day of Atonement was then to provide the sacrifice of atonement, and to offer incense as prayer. He would take the blood of a slain animal to symbolise the atonement for the sins of the nation, and the incense as the symbol of offering prayer to God to forgive the people on the basis of the atonement.

The clothing that the high priest wore is really fascinating and very symbolic. In the 28th chapter of Exodus, we hear this from the Lord: "They shall also make the ephod of gold, of blue and purple and scarlet material and fine twisted linen, the work of the skilful workman. It shall have two shoulder pieces joined to its two ends, that it may be joined. The skilfully woven band, which is on it, shall be like its workmanship, of the same material: of gold, of blue and purple and scarlet material and fine twisted linen. You shall take two onyx stones and engrave on them the names of the sons of Israel, six of their names on the one stone and the names of the remaining six on the other stone, according to their birth. As a jeweler engraves a signet, you shall engrave the two stones according to the names of the sons of Israel; you shall set them in filigree settings of gold. You shall put the two stones on the shoulder pieces of the ephod, as stones of memorial for the sons of Israel, and Aaron – " the high priest " – shall bear their names before the Lord on his two shoulders for a memorial."

He was given a very important garment that was placed on the front; and then above that, two shoulder pieces that were joined together. On the shoulder pieces were two onyx stones; engraved on each, the names of six tribes of Israel. The point of that was this: the high priest carried the nation on his shoulders when he went in to make atonement and to offer prayer, literally carrying all the twelve tribes of Israel. This was one man offering one sacrifice and one prayer for the whole people of God. He went in to offer the sacrificial blood. He went in to offer prayer for their forgiveness. He sprinkled the blood and waved the incense and left.

This is a picture of what we find in John 17. Here we have the great High Priest, and the great High Priest has entered into the Holy of Holies of the presence of God, and He has on His shoulders all His people. He bears them all before God. He has offered His own blood on the heavenly mercy seat as the one true atonement for sin; and now He carries on holy shoulders, above His loving heart, all His people, to offer prayers to God on their behalf. Atonement has been made, and prayer is now offered.

The high priest went in, did this, turned right around and came out. When Jesus ascended into heaven, He went into the Holy of Holies and He is still there, He is still there, and He will be there until all believers are finally gathered into eternal glory. "He is there – " the writer of Hebrews says " – ever-living to make intercession for us." It is as if He sprinkled His blood on the heavenly mercy seat, satisfying the justice of God, an atonement for all who would ever believe; and now continually until the last believer is gathered into glory, He offers prayers before the Father. As our great High Priest, He carries us into the very presence of God.

What is on His heart? His love. Chapter 13, verse 1, began this whole section: "Having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them – " *eis telos* " – to the max." Why does He do this? Why does He offer His atoning blood for us? Why does He ever live to make intercession for us in the presence of God? Because He loves us. He loves us infinitely. He loves us to the same degree that God can love anything, and does love.

We are on His shoulders. But even more importantly, we are in Him. When He is there in the presence of the Father, we are there in Him. We are loved by the Father the same way the Father loves the Son. You say, "Wait a minute, that's got to be stretching it." That isn't stretching it. Go down to verse 23 of this prayer, which I read a little while ago.

Verse 23 says, "I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me – " and the end of verse 26 " – so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them." This is an astounding reality. We are loved as the Son because we are in the Son.

That truth is all over the New Testament. The writers of the epistles of the New Testament talk often about being in Christ. "We are in Christ. We are in Christ." What that means is exactly what it says. We are in Him loved as He is loved. We are in Him righteous as He is righteous. We are in Him blessed as He is blessed with all spiritual blessings in the heaven-lies in Christ. The Father loves the Son infinitely and eternally; and because we are in the Son, He loves us infinitely and eternally. We are as accepted as the Son is accepted: "This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." And we are in Him, loved as He is loved. That is our justification, that is our sanctification, and that is our glorification. How amazing is it to be loved by God as He loves His own Holy Son.

And let me stop and just say something about Christianity that you need to understand. You might not think that the Trinity is an important doctrine, but it is absolutely foundational to everything that is true about God. John says in 1 John, "God is love." If God was only a solitary, singular person, that could not be a part of His eternal nature, because there would be no one to love.

There is a difference between the true and living God and Allah. Allah is a single, solitary deity, invented by men and demons, who is all judgment, all fear, all terror; and so would any singular god be, and people would only exist to do what he wanted them to do. But the triune God is eternal love, and has loved eternally within the Trinity.

If Jesus was a created being, God would love us like He loved Jesus, another created being. But Jesus is not a created being. He is the eternal Son, the eternal second member of the Trinity. God loves us like He loves His Son. This is a love beyond anything that any creature will ever experience.

With that infinite, holy, perfect love, He loves His Son, and He loves us in His Son. This is salvation fullness. This is life. This is blessing. This is glory. So when Christ goes into the heavenly Holy of Holies and comes before the Father, as He does continually, we are there in the throne room with Him. We are there in Him.

In Hebrews chapter 4 and verse 14 we read, "We have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. We do not have a high priest who cannot sympathise with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore, let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

We have a great high priest, who not only loves us as only God can love, but having been man, understands us. He carries us to the Father on His shoulders, in His heart, in Him. The Son of God, the great High Priest, then prays for us. His mediatorial work is real. It is indispensable, it is glorious, it is faithful, it is encouraging; and by that work, He brings all His sons to glory.

Let me help you understand the gospel maybe in another perspective. God loved His Son. God loves because it's His nature to love. And God's love is so boundless and so infinite that God determined He wanted many more sons to love. And so He set in motion creation, and filled that creation with an infinite, wondrous universe, that those on earth could see and read His love by the lavishness of what He has provided, even in a temporal way. He is a lover by nature. Because of this love, He chose many sons and brings them to Himself, places them in His Son, and everlastingly loves them as He loves His Son.

This prayer marks our Lord's transition from His earthly to His heavenly ministry. Here we see as only in this place in Scripture, the beloved Son carrying us and all who believe into the presence of the Father. They are His, He said, "They're Yours." We've seen that - verse 6, verse 9, "They're Yours. You gave them to Me. And now I'm coming to intercede on their behalf to bring them to glory." "All that the Father gives to Me - " John 6 " - will come to Me. I have lost none, but will keep them and raise them in that last day." This is what the intercessory work of our Lord is. It is bringing many sons to glory to satisfy the loving heart of God.

Judas is gone now. Only the eleven remain, and they hear this prayer. I can't comprehend what it must have been like for them to hear this, that they are loved by God as the Son of God is loved, that they are the concern of His own heart cry. He is interceding for them. But not just for them, because in verse 20 He says, "I do not ask on behalf of these alone - " these eleven " - but for those also who believe in Me through their word." They're going to preach the gospel, and they're going to be used to write the New Testament. "And I'm praying for all who will believe through that revelation." Praying for them all. And He prays for us out of incomprehensible and infinite love.

Let's look at verse 11 and we'll just cover a very brief part of this section - verses maybe 11 and 12 - although His requests for them run all the way down to verse 19. Let's just look at 11 and 12: "I am no longer in the world; and yet they themselves are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep them in Your name, the name which You have given Me, that they may be one even as We are. While I was with them, I was keeping them in Your name which You have given Me; and I guarded them and not of them perished but the son of perdition, so that the Scripture would be fulfilled."

"I am no longer in the world." He's anticipating His exodus, His own leaving. About six weeks away at this time, He would ascend into heaven and He would be gone. In just a few hours, He would be under the wrath of God. They need to be guarded while He is suffering for sin, and they need to be guarded after He's gone, "because - " as verse 11 says " - they themselves are in the world."

"I'm out of the world; they're in it." What is the world? It's the system of sin that dominates this realm. It's the corruption, the demonic power, the human power of sin that literally controls the world, under the leadership of Satan and his demons. That's the world.

"They're in the world, Father. The world is dark, the world is demonic, the world is dangerous, the world is deadly." He already told them back in chapter 15, verse 18, the world would hate them because it hated Him. He told them in verse 20, the world would persecute them. He told them again in verse 23 that they would be hated because the world hates Him and hates the Father. In chapter 16, He told them in verse 2 they would become outcasts and they would become martyrs; they would lose their lives. This is a dangerous place for the children of God. They can't survive without divine support. The temptations of Satan are powerful, overwhelmingly powerful, and they need divine protection.

So our Lord then, beginning in verse 11, starts to ask for some specific things by way of our protection. Number One: Spiritual security. Spiritual security. "They're in the world – " He says " – and I come to You." And He's talking, obviously, about His ascension. "I come to You. Holy Father, keep them, keep them, keep them."

Why Holy Father? God is absolutely holy. Can't tolerate sin; is angry with the wicked every day; can't look on evil, iniquity. This is the Holy Son, the Holy Child, praying to the Holy Father. It is the desire of the Holy Son and the desire of the Holy Father to protect the unholy sinners. That's what's happening here. He says Holy Father because it just makes a stark contrast between who God is, who Christ is, and who we are.

Why would the Holy Father care about unholy sinners? Answer: Because they are in His Son. They are in Christ. When Christ comes into His presence, we come on Him and in Him. He says, "Father, Holy Father, keep them in Your name, keep them in Your name, consistent with who You are, and even beyond that, not because they deserve it, but because they belong to You. They are Yours. They are Your sons and daughters. They are Your children. They carry Your name – sons of God. They belong to You, a name which You have given Me. They're in My name too: sons of God, Christians. They're Yours and they're Mine; keep them."

Back in the 10th chapter of John and verse 27, there's a reminder of this in some of the most familiar words of our Lord: "My sheep – " My sheep, My sheep " – hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand." "They're Mine and they're Yours. You owned them; they were Yours; You gave them to Me. I have held them. Now, Father, You hold them; You guard them; You keep them. You and I are one. While I was with them – " He says " – on earth, I was keeping them. The ones that belonged to You, and now to Me, I was keeping them." Keep means "to watch over protectively." We're going to see an illustration of that in chapter 18 that may be the most remarkable illustration of that promise or that purpose of Christ in the whole of the gospels.

When in chapter 18, they come to arrest Jesus, they want also to arrest the disciples. The Lord never lets that happen; He protects them from that, because theoretically, it could have destroyed their faith. But He will never let anything that could do that happen. We'll see that in chapter 18.

He is about to suffer. He is about to come under the weight and burden of sin, and take His hands away from His disciples; and the Father needs to guard them for those hours. And then when He comes back to heaven, the Father needs to continue to guard them, which He promises to do through the Holy Spirit, whom He gives to every believer.

"I guarded them," He says in verse 12. That's *phulass*, it means "to protect from outside threats." It's used in Luke 11 of a strong man guarding a house. It's used in Acts 28 of soldiers guarding Paul. "I guarded them; I kept them. I now need You, Father, to take over and guard them. And by the way, while I was guarding them – " He said " – none of them perished."

Now, if the sentence ended there, we'd have a problem: "None of them perished." We'd all be saying, "Wait, wait a minute. There's only eleven here. There's Judas. What about Judas? What about Judas? Isn't Judas proof that a disciple, a visible associate of Jesus, a preacher for God, can be lost? Isn't Judas the prototype of a believer who is saved and then loses salvation because he turns and rejects the Lord he once confessed?"

If our Lord didn't say anything here about Judas, we would have a serious dilemma. So to make sure that never happens, He injects into this otherwise magnificent and beautiful prayer, this one ugly, dark, black note in the whole prayer; it's the only one. "I guarded them, and not one of them perished."

Not one of what? Not one of whom? "None of the ones You have given Me perished. None of them. None of the ones who were Your and now are Mine perished but the son of perdition, so that the Scripture would be fulfilled." Judas was never a son of God, he was always a son of perdition.

Son means "nature." Perdition is the word for "destruction, waste, ruin." He was a son of ruin. It's used in [Matthew 7:13](#), "The broad road leads to destruction." He is a son of destruction, not a son of God. He is an outsider.

Back in the 6th chapter of John at the end of the chapter, Jesus us with the disciples, and Peter says, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God.' Jesus answered them, 'Did I Myself not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?' He meant Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, for he was one of the twelve that who was going to betray Him."

There was a devil there from the beginning, a son of perdition, never a son of God. You say, "Well, isn't this a terrible blight on the plan?" No. This was the plan so that the Scripture would be fulfilled.

Back in chapter 13 on that very same evening in the upper room, Jesus said, "I do not speak of all of you – " 13:18 " – I know the ones I have chosen. I know the ones I have chosen. I know the ones – " in 17 " – the Father has given Me; but it is that the Scripture may be fulfilled – " [Psalm 41:9](#) " – He who eats My bread has lifted up his heel against Me.' From now on I'm telling you before it comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am, that am God, because I know about Him what you don't know, and I know what he will do. He is a son of perdition, he is a devil."

That same night in the upper room, Satan entered into Judas. Judas was nonetheless treated with love by the Lord that same night. Chapter 13, Judas was treated as the honored guest, given the first piece of bread to dip in the sop, as they called it, the meal. Judas is guilty on his own. The fact that Scripture prophesied he would do this is not a determinism, he did what he chose to do.

Listen to [Matthew 26:24](#), "The Son of Man is to go, just as it is written of Him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if had not been born.' And Judas, who was betraying Him said, 'Surely it is not I, Rabbi?' Jesus said to him, 'You have said it yourself.'" So our Lord says, "I've guarded them. None of them has been lost, none of them have perished but the son of perdition, so that the Scripture would be fulfilled."

Does the Father hear that prayer to keep and guard His own? He does, He does, and we have testimony to that. In Romans, chapter 8, at the end of the chapter, do you remember these words: "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." We can never be separated from the love of God. God will bring us to glory. God will get us to heaven, because we are in His Son, and He loves His Son perfectly, and thus, He loves us as He loves His Son; and that love will bring us to glory.

Peter understood this and wrote these marvelous words, praising God that he will hear and answer our Lord's prayer. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy, has caused us to be born again to a living hope, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you who are protected by the power of God, through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed at the last time."

Our Lord prays for our spiritual security. Our Lord prays for us because He loves us like He loves the Father. The Father hears His prayer and answers it, because He loves us like He loves the Son. That's a stunning thing to realize that what secures our salvation is eternal love, which is behind eternal election, which is behind eternal justification and eternal glorification. So our Lord prays for our spiritual security.

Just briefly, He secondly prays for our spiritual unity. This is just briefly stated in verse 11, and it'll come up again at the end of the chapter. We'll just look at it here. Back in verse 11, the end of the verse, "Keep them in Your name, the name which You have given Me, that they may be one even as We are, that they may be one even as We are." This is not talking about us getting along with each other in the church. That's a different issue.

It's nice; it's an important issue; the Bible addresses that issue. We need to have a real, practical, living unity among believers. That's not this prayer. What this prayer is is beyond that. It is that we may be one even as the Trinity is one.

Salvation – listen – is not just a ticket to heaven. It is not just forgiveness of sins. It is not just escape from punishment. It is God, listen, pulling us into the eternal life of the Trinity. All of us who are justified literally are pulled into the life of the Trinity. We are in the Father; we are in the Son; we are in the Spirit. The Father is in us; the Son is in us; the Spirit is in us.

We've seen that all through this section of John. The indivisible unity of the Trinity engulfs us and we are one with Christ. That's why Paul says, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me. I'm in Christ and Christ's in me. I'm in the Spirit, the Spirit's in me. I'm in the Father, the Father's in me." That's why when we talk about joy a little later, Jesus says, "You have My joy." And when He talks about peace earlier, "You have My peace. Why? Because you have My life."

What does it mean to be a believer? It literally means that God loves us with such an infinite love, that He loves us the same as He loves His own Son, with an eternal and infinite love, and with that love pulls us into the very Trinity. That's what this prayer's about.

Paul writes Philippians and Ephesians that talk about practical unity. This is a prayer for invisible unity, for the reality of the life of God to be sustained in our souls forever. Do you understand this, that you are secure, not just because God said you are, but because He makes sure you are, through the intercession of the Son? That God is a Trinity is absolutely critical. And when we talk about image of God and man being made in the image of God, what we're essentially saying is, we were created with a capacity to love. We were created with a capacity for relationships. That's the image of God: meaningful relationships, loving relationships. Animals have relationships; they don't have love. Our Lord prays then that we would be spiritually secure and that we would be spiritually one. And the answer to that prayer from the Lord is, "Absolutely. That is the divine purpose."

Look down at verse 21, "That they may all be one, even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You." This is not some kind of external practical unity, this is the unity of common life, existence, "that they may be one, as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us." He says it again, verse 23, "I in them, You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity." Do you want to get a grip on the greatness of your salvation? That's it.

So our Lord goes into the Holy of Holies, bears us on His shoulders, comes before the Father who loves us as much as He loves the Son, and prays to the loving Father to do what the loving Father already has determined to do. He prays in perfect accord with the will of God to bring about our spiritual safety, our spiritual security, and our spiritual unity. We are literally drawn into the love relationship of the Trinity. That's where we live and move and have our being. It doesn't yet appear what we shall be, but someday, we're going to see the fullness of that in His presence.

Father, as we come now to the Table that takes us back to the cross, we do so with joy and gratitude. Without the sacrifice, without the blood being sprinkled, the intercession would be meaningless. The Savior can only intercede for those for whom He has atoned; and He bears us on His shoulders as our great High Priest. Father, we thank You, that You hear and answer His prayer, because He offered His own atoning blood as the full, perfect satisfaction for Your justice. Thank You for the One who is the Lamb and the great High Priest.

Fill our hearts with gratitude. And, also, we come before You confessing our sins and failures, Lord. How we could ever sin against such love, such eternal love, is hard to imagine. But it's a battle, as we are still incarcerated in unredeemed flesh. So, Lord, we need Your cleansing. Open our hearts to confess, amen.