

Introduction to John 17

Old Testament Context

An interesting parallel to the prayer of John 17 is found in Deuteronomy. That book concludes with the Song of Moses (chap. 32) and Moses' blessings of the tribes (chap. 33).¹ John's gospel points out areas of similarity and contrast with Moses. Jesus, his disciples, the crowds and his opponents discuss the connection between his actions and words and those of Moses (Jn 1:17, 45; 3:14; 5:45–46; 6:32; 7:19, 22–23; 8:5; 9:28–29). The significant differences here in John 17 are the identity of the one praying (the Son of God) and the occasion of his impending death being not the result of disobedience, but of obedience - another parallel/contrast between Jesus and Moses.

New Testament Context

The last discourse can be seen as a farewell to Israel, not simply his disciples. Jesus does not enter the temple after this point. He has been rejected.

The breadth and depth of chapters 13-16 are unique to John's Gospel. In these chapters Jesus is revealed more fully than ever before as not just a teacher but an intercessor, prophet and High Priest.

The prayer that follows in John 17 ties all these threads together and forges them into a passionate call to oneness, love and mission. The same themes matter still to Jesus and he is involved in making them a reality. These are not the last words of a man now dead, but the words of one who was resurrected, lives and intercedes.

Later Uses

Some commentators think that sections of the John 17 prayer may have been used in celebrating the Lord's Supper by the early church. Perhaps we should consider how we might use it in this way today. Can you think of any other ways it could be used for personal or congregational benefit?

Prayer

Jesus' prayer is the third recorded by John. The others are at Lazarus' tomb (Jn 11:41–42), and the time Jesus was approached by Greeks (Jn 12:27–28). Do you see any significance in John giving us these three? Are there any common threads?

This prayer is the longest prayer of Jesus we have anywhere in the New Testament. How long do you think it took to pray? Why not pray it yourself and see how long it takes.

Lutheran theologian David Chytraeus called this "Our Lord's "High Priestly prayer"", seeing it as Jesus consecrating himself as both priest and victim, but also consecrating his disciples present and future.

Structure

Structures can be invented where none exist, but it does seem that Jesus has a clear set of priorities for his prayer. Here is one example of a structure:

- (i) vv 1–5, prayer for the glory of the Son that he may give life to those given to him
- (ii) vv 6–12, prayer for the disciples; giving the reason for praying for them
- (iii) vv 13–19, prayer that they may be kept safe, and that they may be consecrated with Jesus
- (iv) vv 20–26, prayer that all believers may be one; and that believers may be perfected in the glory of Jesus

¹ The former is a psalm, the latter a kind of prophetic prayer.