

Insiders

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[0 : 01] So welcome again on this Ascension Sunday, and happy Mother's Day. My name is Jeff, and I'm one of the pastors here, and hopefully this will work.

Is that good to go? I guess not. I'll just use this. That's great. So my sophomore year of college, one Tuesday afternoon, my roommate Matt and I, we skipped class and we drove to Richmond, Virginia.

And that night, at a music venue in Richmond, one of my favorite bands was playing, the Goo Goo Dolls. I don't know if you've heard of this band, the Goo Goo Dolls.

It might depend on which generation you're from. They were a popular band in the 90s and the 2000s. You may have heard some of their songs, Iris, Slide, Black Balloon.

Those may or may not be familiar to you. But the reason why I was so excited is we weren't just going to attend a concert. My roommate Matt, his girlfriend at the time, actually happened to be the drummer of the band, Goo Goo Dolls.

[1 : 04] And he had gotten us all backstage passes. And I still remember getting there and arriving and going backstage, being escorted by security and getting to meet all of the band members.

And I remember thinking, this is so surreal. I can't believe this is happening. I am getting to hang out backstage with one of my favorite bands. I remember watching Uncle John, the drummer, drink almost an entire pot of coffee before he went out on stage.

I remember seeing the set list of all the songs posted on a wall and all of the guitars lined up for the whole concert. And John Resnick, the lead singer, I remember that he clearly had way too much Botox in his face.

And right before he went on stage, he walked past me and he said something really sarcastic, not to me, but just as he walked past me, because he had to duct tape his mic pack to his belt because he couldn't quite get it on.

And I still remember what that moment felt like. I remember all of these memories and these feelings of being backstage. It was this amazing experience because just for a moment, I felt like I was part of the inner circle of one of my favorite bands.

[2 : 22] And the truth is that all of us have this longing. We all have this longing to be on the inside, to be part of an inner circle. Maybe it's at work.

Maybe there's a certain role. Maybe there's a certain team. Maybe there's another job that we've just always wanted to be part of. Maybe it's a group of friends at school, a social circle.

Maybe it's a school that we're trying to get into. In his essay, The Inner Ring, C.S. Lewis describes this dynamic. In his essay, he says that in every person's life, we all have this desire to be on the inside of things.

And we feel a certain pleasure when we get invited in. And we feel a certain anguish when we're excluded. This is also Aaron Burr's character in Hamilton.

There's that song, right, where Aaron Burr sings what? He sings, I want to be in the room where it happens. I want to be in the room where it happens. In many ways, this is Washington, D.C., where there are large buildings where highly exclusive conversations happen, where only a select group of people get to make important decisions.

[3 : 34] And there's armed guards outside these buildings to remind you that you are not one of them. I think one of the more common features in our culture that creates this insider-outsider dynamic is perhaps the paywall.

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There's so many dynamics in our culture that create this insider-outsider dynamic. And it speaks to this desire that we all have to be on the inside.

To be part of an inner circle. And this core desire is actually what our passage in John 17 speaks to. It's one of the most unique passages in the whole Bible.

Because it's a prayer of Jesus. And in fact, it is actually the longest recorded prayer of Jesus that we have. There's none other like it.

[4 : 36] And in this prayer, what we're given is we are given exclusive backstage access to the relationship that Jesus has with his Father.

And by studying this passage, we not only get to listen in on the inner life of the Trinity, but we are actually invited to be part of it. To join in on the very life of God.

So first of all, we're going to look at a few things. We're going to look at how Jesus prays in this prayer. We're going to look at what he prays and why it matters. How Jesus prays, what he prays, and why it matters.

First of all, let's look at how Jesus prays. This passage in John 17 is part of what's called the upper room discourse. If you're following along in the Gospel of John, you'll notice that chapters 13 through 17 are all one scene.

They're all part of Jesus in the upper room during the Passover meal, the night before he's arrested and betrayed. And in the upper room, following the Passover meal, Jesus spends an extended time teaching his disciples in chapters 13 through 16.

[5 : 45] And this prayer in chapter 17 comes at the end of all that. And this is right before he heads to the Garden of Gethsemane, where he is ultimately betrayed and arrested.

And this prayer of Jesus is often called his high priestly prayer. His high priestly prayer. And if we're going to understand what that means, we need to do a little bit of Old Testament homework.

The work of priests in the Old Testament was complex and multifaceted work. And it was the exclusive job of the high priest to offer a sacrifice for sin on behalf of all the people on the Day of Atonement.

And this is a job that involved multiple detailed steps. The first thing the high priest would do would be to prepare his own body by bathing and cleansing himself.

And then he would put on the priestly garments. This is what is referred to in our Old Testament reading, Exodus 28, that was read earlier. The priest would put on an undergarment, a robe, a turban on his head, a sash tied around the waist.

[6 : 52] But what Exodus chapter 28 goes into detail the most on is the breastplate. The breastplate. On the priest's breastplate were 12 precious jewels.

And on each jewel were engraved the names of the 12 tribes of Israel. And so this is what, look at what Exodus 28 verse 29 says. So Aaron the high priest shall bear the names of the sons of Israel in the breastpiece of judgment on his heart when he goes into the holy place to bring them to regular remembrance before the Lord.

So Aaron would carry the names of Israel engraved on his heart before the presence of God as he went to make the sacrifice of atonement.

After putting on his priestly garments, he would then make two sacrifices. Two animals, one for himself and one for all of the people. And these sacrifices would be made outside the sanctuary.

Outside the inner presence of God, the most holy place. And then the priest would bring the blood of the sacrifices. He would bring them inside, into the inner sanctuary, and sprinkle the altar with the blood of the sacrifice.

[8 : 08] Now, all of this is actually really important, both to understand our passage in John chapter 17 and to understand what Ascension Sunday is all about.

For understanding the significance of the ascension. See, the work of a high priest wasn't finished once the sacrifice was made. And that's because the sacrifice occurred outside the inner sanctuary.

In order for the sacrifice to be effective on behalf of the people, it had to be brought in. It had to be brought into the holy of holies, the inner sanctuary. And so this is why when we think about Jesus being our great high priest, the cross actually isn't complete on its own.

The cross isn't complete without the ascension. In his death, Jesus makes a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. Only unlike Aaron, he doesn't make a sacrifice for himself because he was sinless.

But it's in the ascension that he presents the finished work of his sacrifice into the inner presence of God, in the heavenly throne room, so that it becomes effective on our behalf. This is what much of the book of Hebrews talks about.

[9 : 22] Listen to Hebrews chapter 9, verse 24. For Christ has entered not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.

So in his death on the cross, Jesus pays the debt for our sin, but it's in the ascension, the ascension provides confirmation that that check has cleared.

And this helps us understand part of what Jesus is doing in John chapter 17 before he goes to the cross. In this prayer, Jesus is putting on his priestly garments.

He's preparing for his atoning work. Just as Aaron bore the names of Israel on the jewels upon his heart, so Jesus Christ is putting on a much greater breastplate.

He's bearing the names of all those for whom he would suffer and die. He's going to the cross with your name and my name engraved upon his heart, so much so that it calls him to pray for us, to intercede for us before the Father.

[10 : 41] He's saying to his Father, this is who I love the most. They are precious to me. They are jewels upon my heart, and I am praying for them. And so this is why Jesus' prayer here in John 17 is called his high priestly prayer.

And as we'll see, it's both a prayer that he prays for himself and for us. It's a prayer that he prays both for himself and for us. And that's the next thing that we're going to look at is what Jesus prays in this prayer.

There are kind of three main things that Jesus prays for in John 17. He prays for his glory, for our holiness, and for the church's unity.

He prays for our glory, his glory, our holiness, and the church's unity. So first of all, Jesus prays for his glory. And we see this in verses one and two. Jesus prays, Father, the hour has come.

Glorify your Son, that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you've given him.

[11 : 48] I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. Now, at first, it probably seems a bit egocentric for someone to pray for their own glory.

And that's true for any person who isn't God. But for Jesus to pray for his own glory is actually a good thing. And I want to show you why. Because in this prayer, we see the mutually glorifying relationship of the Trinity.

We see that the Son glorifies the Father by accomplishing the work that the Father gave him to do in his life, his ministry, his death.

And the Father glorifies the Son by rising him from the dead and giving him authority over all things in his ascension. And even though the Holy Spirit isn't mentioned here, it's implied.

Because how did the Father and the Son glorify one another? Through the power of the Holy Spirit. And so here in Jesus' prayer to his Father, we get this window, we get this backstage access into God's own Trinitarian life.

[13 : 02] The Trinity is this divine dance of mutually glorifying love. And the incredible thing is that we are invited to join in.

We see this later in verse 24 where Jesus prays this, Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me, because you love me before the foundation of the world, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them.

One of the deepest desires of Jesus that he pleads for before the Father as our great high priest is that you and I would get to join in on the eternal glory and love and life that has existed before all eternity between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

In the Christian tradition, this has often been called to, been referred to as the beatific vision, the promise that one day we will see God and behold him in all his glory and experience loving, joyful communion with him forever.

This same love, the same glory that has existed between the Trinity before all eternity. And this is why Jesus' prayer for his own glory is good news for us because it gives us insider access.

[14 : 27] It gives us backstage passes into the glory and love of the Trinity. Because our great high priest who has ascended into heaven bears our names engraved on his heart and he pleads before the Father that we would share in his divine glory and the prayers of Jesus are always effective.

You might say, well Jeff, I know that you have to talk about this stuff because you're a pastor. You know, things like glory and love and the ascension.

But if I'm being honest, this sounds like a lot of just super spiritual talk. What in the world does this have to do with my real life? And the answer that I would give you is everything.

Everything. Because you and I were made for nothing less than infinite glory. We are glory hungry creatures. We long for recognition.

We long for applause. We long for approval. We long for status. And we spend our lives seeking it in a thousand different places. in power, in fame, success, money, in jobs, in relationships, in promotions, in titles, in social media followers.

[15 : 51] But none of those can ever satisfy our deep longing for glory. Why? C.S. Lewis offers this answer in his sermon called The Weight of Glory.

And he says this, If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised to us in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong but too weak.

We are half-hearted creatures fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us. like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.

We are far too easily pleased. And this is the human condition that we are far too easily pleased. The small glories of money and fame and success and power are mud pies compared to the infinite glory that we have been invited into.

Jesus not only prays that we will see the eternal beauty of God but that we will experience it and be transformed by it.

[17 : 12] And far from being an egocentric prayer this is the prayer that we most need because the glory of Jesus and our deepest joy are inextricably linked.

And what follows in the rest of Jesus' prayer in John 17 flows from this central reality. Jesus continues to pray for our holiness and for the church's unity but all of these things fit together because they're all about us participating in the divine glory of the Trinity.

In verses 15 through 19 Jesus goes on to pray for our sanctification our holiness us growing to become more like him. And he prays this so that we might share in his nature that we might share in his glory.

But this isn't a holiness that causes us to escape from the messiness and brokenness and fallenness of the world. It's actually a holiness that sends us out into the world on mission just like Christ.

And he prays to the Father he says Father as you sent me into the world so I have sent them into the world. As we share in the glory of the Trinity we also share in the mission of the Trinity.

[18 : 31] As the Father sent the Son and the power of the Spirit he sends us also into the world. This same logic also applies to the church's unity which Jesus prays for in verses 20 to 23.

He says I do not ask for these only but also for those who will believe in me through their word that they may all be one just as you Father are in me and I in you that they also may be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

Why should we pursue unity in the church? So we can have peaceful community and avoid conflict so that we can pursue common goals?

Those are all good things but they are not the main reason. The reason that Jesus gives us is because the glory that the Father has given him he has given to the church.

God himself is a communion of unity amid diversity. He's one God in three persons.

[19 : 42] This eternal communion of divine love. And because the church has been invited into this communion this is why the unity of the church is mission critical.

Because when the church is unified amidst its own diversity it sends a powerful witness to the world that there is a Trinitarian God of love who joins a diverse people into one body one family one communion of love.

And when there is loving unity in the church it reflects the loving unity of the Trinity. community. And when there's not it robs the power of our witness. And that's true both in the universal global church and it's true in the local church.

So we've covered a lot of ground here in John 17 so let's bring it home and tie it all together. All of us have this longing to be inside. To be where things happen.

To have insider access. And if you try to satisfy that longing by chasing after the inner circles of jobs and schools and social groups you'll never actually be satisfied.

[20 : 58] Because there will always be some inner circle that you will be excluded from. But don't you see that the real inner circle that your soul was made for is the eternal dance of God.

The glory and love and joy of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit that has existed before the world began. And don't you see that everything that Christ did was to give you access into that communion.

And if you know that, if you know that you've been invited into that, you'll be able to experience a certain kind of rest, a certain kind of freedom, a certain kind of security in your heart.

and that will be true regardless of whether or not you get invited to that job interview, whether or not you get invited to be part of that friend group or that school.

You can relax. It won't threaten your core identity. It won't threaten your self-worth because you know that you've been given access to the greatest inner circle of all. How many people in a city like Washington, D.C.

[22 : 10] have that kind of freedom, have that kind of rest, have that kind of security, that they know their life isn't just this rat race of trying to get in on the inner circle.

Maybe others of you today need to hear about the assurance of God's love for you, that you really belong to him, that he's with you. Maybe you've been doubting whether God actually loves you like he says he does.

But don't you see that the great lengths and the extravagant detail that Jesus Christ went through for you to bring you into the very life of God. As your great high priest, he went to the cross with your name engraved on his heart.

And don't you see what the ascension means? It means that Jesus didn't just go to the cross with your name engraved on his heart. He didn't just bear your name on the cross, but he took it with him into the heavenly throne room before God the Father.

And he still pleads for you and intercedes for you on your behalf. Think about that. And let that bring the deep assurance that God is with you, that he loves you, that he's for you.

[23 : 32] You're so precious to him. You're a jewel upon his heart. You're on the forefront of his mind. And finally, maybe there's some of you who would say, you know, my coming in this morning, my relationship with God just feels flat.

My prayer life is stale. I just kind of feel like I'm in a spiritual plateau. I'm in a rut. What could motivate us more to experience fellowship with God?

What could motivate us more to pray? knowing that Jesus Christ as our great high priest is already praying for us. He's praying for you right now, interceding for you before the Father.

He's praying for you to experience the glory and the love that he experiences with the Father and the Spirit. And when we pray, we are joining our prayers to his.

We are joining this Trinitarian dance, this Trinitarian conversation that has already been taking place before the foundation of the world. And that transforms the way we see prayer.

[24 : 39] Prayer isn't just a spiritual exercise, but it's about having access to the greatest inner circle of all, joining Jesus in conversation and fellowship and love with the Trinity.

Prayer doesn't always feel glorious. In fact, most times we don't feel anything. It feels fairly ordinary and mundane. But the more that we learn to pray, the more that we get a real taste, a real experience of what our future glory will be like that Jesus promises here in John 17.

And I've already quoted C.S. Lewis twice, so I figure I will end by quoting him a third time. At the end of his sermon, The Weight of Glory, C.S.

Lewis says this, for if we take the image of Scripture seriously, if we believe that God will one day give us the morning star and cause us to put on the splendor of the sun, then we may surmise that both the ancient myths and modern poetry are true.

At present, we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side of the door. We discern the freshness and purity of the morning, but they do not make us fresh and pure.

[26 : 01] We cannot mingle with the splendors that we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumor that it will not always be so.

Someday, God willing, we shall get in. Let's pray. Our God and Father, we thank you that you have invited us into your inner circle, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, through the work of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.

I pray that we would, our hearts would be fed with the assurance that comes from that. I pray for those who long to experience you, who long to experience your fellowship, that you would pour your Holy Spirit.

Jesus, thank you that you are our risen, ascended King. You're our risen, ascended High Priest. And you bear our names on your heart.

I pray this in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen.