

Explore the Bible: I Pray

April 10, 2023

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for April 23 focuses on John 17:13-26.*

The love and concern Jesus has for his disciples—and ultimately for all believers who would come after them—is glowingly obvious in his prayer found in John 17. While he opens with a request to be glorified by the Father, he immediately turns the subject to others.

One might think this is the opportune time for Jesus to make himself the focus of prayer as he prepares to endure wrongful arrest, sentencing and execution. Rather, he spends the vast majority of his prayer to ensure the needs of his followers are met once he departs.

The requests he makes for his disciples are rooted in his desire for them to “have the full measure of [his] joy within them” (John 17:13) and to provide for them in their mission to declare the message of Jesus to the world. This desire prompts Jesus to ask the Father for protection, sanctification and unity for his followers.

Protect them from the evil one (John 17:15)

Throughout his ministry, Jesus names and confronts the works of the devil at conflict with his mission. He knows those works will continue to be heaped on his disciples after his departure to be with the Father. They will be vulnerable to the ploys of the evil one without Jesus.

Jesus wants his dear companions to be protected from the dangers that lurk in the world. While he expresses his desire for them “to be with me where I

am” (John 17:24), he knows they must remain to continue the mission. For the mission to be preserved, they will require the divine hand of God to protect them from all that the evil one plans to use against them.

Sanctify them by the Truth (John 17:17)

While his disciples remain in the world, they are not “of the world.” Jesus even goes so far as to say, “they are not of the world any more than I am of the world” (John 17:14). Jesus views his disciples so highly, he compares their sanctification to his own sanctification.

Sanctification is the process of being made holy and set apart by God. Holiness is distinct from the world and, thereby, a noticeable contrast to the world, drawing attention to God. Though separate from the world, holiness is alluring to the world. A function of the disciples, as God’s sanctified people, is to draw attention to God as his set-apart people.

The mode of the disciples’ sanctification is truth—“Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17). That which sets the disciples apart from the world is the truth of God’s word.

In one sense, we know God provides his word through the Scriptures, which guide God’s people into the truth of who God is and the truth of God’s mission in the world. In another sense, we know that Jesus is the Word and the self-identified Truth (see John 1:1; 14:6). The disciples have received the fullness of God’s truth as revealed in Jesus, who opened their eyes to the truth through his teaching and who also presented them to the truth through his very person.

That all of them may be one (John 17:21)

The subjects of Jesus' prayer extend from his disciples to include "those who will believe in me through their message" (John 17:20). Clearly, Jesus desires that the message of what God has accomplished for the world through him would expand and many would come to faith in him. Furthermore, he desires the believers would be unified.

Unity appears to be tied to our sanctification as well—"I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:22-23).

Unity is something that is meant to mark believers in the world as those who belong to God. Much like with Jesus comparing our sanctification to his, it is significant Jesus compares our unity to his unity with the Father. This goes to show the great level of severity our unity holds in living out our mission as God's sanctified people drawing more to belief in Jesus.

As extensions of Jesus' intercession in John 17, we—as believers today—should feel both the comfort of these requests on our behalf and a burden to offer our lives as answers to Jesus' prayer. Just like the disciples required protection from the evil one, we also need God's protection to avoid the ploys of the enemy.

We should note that the very aspects of our lives the evil one will go after are our sanctification and unity. These are the components that will direct the world away from the evil one and to the Holy One. The "prince of this world" (John 12:31) is threatened by our stark contrast to his domain. Thus, he will go after that which distinguishes us from the rest of the world. May

we instead choose to fulfil the wishes of our Lord—to stand out as God’s people and to strengthen our unity so the world would come to know Jesus.

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