

STUDY 9 - JOHN 17:20-26

As these chapters draw to a conclusion, as Jesus finishes praying to his Father he prays for all Christians everywhere, in all times. Jesus prays for us here! The connecting verse (verse 20) seems to indicate that some of what he prays for his disciples (verse 6-19) is true for all his followers – the division is not as clear cut as our translations make it appear. “My prayer is not for them alone” can point backwards in the passage as well as forwards.

Notice how Christians are described “those who will believe in me through their message”. The role of the disciples is crucial – to take the message of Christ to the world, and Christians will be those who believe the message, and therefore believe in Christ.

Jesus’ prayer for all his followers is for their unity “that all of them may be one”. This is often used as an incentive to all kinds of ecumenical activity and as a way of putting pressure on churches to link up with everyone who calls themselves Christians. We need to carefully see what Jesus is praying for here.

Firstly it is important to note that this is not a piece of wishful thinking coming from Jesus’ mouth. It’s not as if he looks into the future and knows there will be lots of denominations and churches and wishes it won’t be like this. No – this is a prayer. Like all the requests in this chapter it is not just a desire, but an intercession from the Son to the Father which will be answered.

Then notice exactly what Jesus is asking for. What kind of “oneness” is Jesus praying for? A oneness which is “just as you are in me and I am in you”. It is like the oneness the Father knows with the Son. The relationship between the Father and the Son has already been an illustration of how Christians are to live back in 15:9-11 (we are to obey Jesus just as Jesus obeys his Father).

But what Jesus prays goes deeper – we are not just to pattern our unity as Christians on the loving relationship between the Father and the Son, actually the only way it can happen is if we enter in to that Trinitarian relationship. Notice what Jesus says “May they also be in us...” This is the climax to all we have seen in these chapters. Jesus is going so we may know the way to the Father, and so that we may receive the Holy Spirit who unites us to the Trinitarian God. As we are united to God we share in Jesus’ glory – the glory the Father gave to the Son (verse 22). This “glory” is not a glory of human success, but a glory which serves and goes to the cross, revealing God’s character in love and obedience.

As we see this we should notice clearly that this unity is given. It is not created by us. All those who are united to Christ by his Spirit already possess this unity. Therefore we cannot and should not try to show unity with those who do not know Christ and in the way he reveals. The primary application of these verses is, I think, that Jesus is praying for the salvation of all his people. That is how “all of them may be one” as they are united to God.

However there is also a second application, as that unity must be visible to the world around. As people come to faith in Christ, that is seen clearly in the church and the world will see a people called out from among them to belong to Christ. Jesus asks that the world’s response (verse 23) will be that they recognise that Jesus had been sent by his Father out of love for his people, a recognition of his mission. If this does not lead to a wonderful result here and now as people turn to

Christ and are saved out of the world, verse 23 will definitely be fulfilled on the last day as everyone will see who Christ is and who his people are.

Verse 24 is a wonderful and precious verse for every Christian. Jesus does not simply want us to come to know him in this life, or to obey him here. Jesus greatest desire is that we be with him in glory. He will get us there!

As Jesus closes his prayer Verses 25 and 26 summarises all we have seen in these great chapters. There is one clear division in mankind – between the world (who do not recognise who Jesus is) and those Jesus has revealed the Father to and chosen out of the world. Although Jesus is leaving this physical earth that does not mean he is abandoning his people. He will continue to make his Father known (as we have seen through these chapters he will now do that through his Spirit through the disciples who will proclaim and obey his word). The reason Jesus will do that is the same reason he has always done that – to magnify and reveal the love the Father has for the Son, a love which amazingly is now in us as we are united to Christ and Christ himself is in us by his Spirit.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Who does Jesus pray for now? How are they/we described?

What is Jesus main request?

What is the illustration Jesus uses of the kind of “oneness” he is talking about?

How will we be one? Is this an “oneness” we are to create, through (for example) meetings and conferences?

As we are “in us (God)” what do we receive? (Verse 22) What kind of glory has Jesus had while he was on earth? What does that tell us about what kind of glory we have?

What does Jesus pray will be the result of our unity? What does it say to the world?

What is Jesus’ great desire for his people? Why is that a great comfort? (Verse 24)

Go through verses 25 and 26 slowly. How does what Jesus prays here pick up on themes we have seen throughout these chapters?