

The Desire of Our Lord: A Sermon on John 17:24-26

By Rev. D. Patrick Ramsey

Introduction

While he was on his deathbed, the Scottish Reformer John Knox had John 17 read to him every day. In the closing moments of his life, he testified that these verses continued to be a great comfort and a source of strength for him.¹

Now, if I were a betting man, I would wager a large amount of money that Knox's heart was especially comforted and strengthened when verse 24 was read. For here, as our Lord pours out his heart to his Father, out comes a burning passion to be with you and me.

Jesus Desires to Have You with Him

If I wanted to know your deepest longings and desires, then I would retrieve and study a transcript of your prayers. In particular, I would need a copy of your private prayers, since that is where we all freely and openly pour out our hearts to God. And by looking at what you ask for, I would learn what is truly near and dear to your heart.

Here in John 17, the night before his death, Jesus opens the window of his heart in this prayer to his Father. And what do we see? We see an ardent yearning for our presence as he prays: "Father, I desire that they also whom you gave me may be with me where I am."

Although the Greek word is sometimes translated "will," the words "desire" (NKJV, ESV) or "want" (NIV) convey the meaning better. For the Greek word does not just express determination, but also pleasure, delight and aspiration.² So, Jesus is articulating his heart's desire to his Father. This is what he wants: he longs for you and me to be where he is.

Without a doubt this request shows that Jesus loves you with a heartfelt, tender love. This can be seen more clearly when we contrast what is said here with similar expressions.

¹ James M. Boice, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 4:1247.

² William Hendricksen, *John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 366.

For instance, in John 14:1-3 Jesus says to his disciples that they are to not let their hearts be troubled because he is going away. He assures them that he is leaving to prepare a place for them, and that he will come back for them so that they may be where he is. In other words, Jesus will not forsake his disciples, but will one day deliver them out of their difficulty and bring them to heaven (and eventually the new heavens and new earth). Similarly, Jesus says to the suffering thief on the cross, “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Now it is one thing for Christ to comfort us by saying that he will most definitely deliver us from all of our trouble and pain by taking us to himself. It is another thing altogether, and much greater, for him to yearn for our presence.

Imagine for a moment that I had a nephew, known to be a troublemaker, who was just orphaned and needing a place to stay. My wife then asks me what I think we should do. I could respond in several ways.

First, I could say something like this: “Even though he is a difficult child and I don’t really want to look after him, I think we should have him come and live with us. It would be much better for him to stay here in a Christian home than in a secular foster home.”

Or secondly: “The right thing to do, regardless of whether or not we might find another good home, is that he needs to stay with us. We may not like it, but we promised to do it, and so we must love him and take care of him.”

Finally: “I would love to have my nephew stay with us. That is my heart’s desire and pleasure. I would be devastated if he did not come and live with us.”

It is the last response that best captures the spirit of Jesus’ prayer in John 17:24. He does not ask for you to be with him merely because that is what is best for you, or simply because it is the right thing to do, but because that is his heart’s aspiration. This is what he longs for! And so he asks his Father for it!

This makes sense, even though it is hard to believe, when you consider that he calls you the apple of his eye (Deut. 32:10), his treasure (Exod. 19:5), his portion (Deut. 32:9), and his bride (Rev. 21:9). How could Christ not want to spend eternity with those who are so precious to him?

Robert M. M’Cheyne’s sermon on this passage contains this striking sentence: “In truth, Christ cannot [lack] you. You are his jewels — his crown. Heaven would be no heaven to him, if you were not there.”³ Think about that for a moment! Let its truth sink deep down into your inner most being, and your heart will soar to the highest heavens in inexpressible joy, wonder and praise!

³ Andrew A. Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray M’Cheyne* (Carlisle, Pa.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 470.

Jesus wants you to be with him. That is why we should see the deaths of our Christian loved ones and of ourselves as the Father's answer to his Son's prayer. Benjamin Morgan Palmer once eloquently said:

Now, one of the strongest instincts of the human soul is the longing to be with those whom you love. Ah, my brethren, need I tell that to you? How many wear the badges of mourning, and draw down those crape veils over your faces! Do you not know all about the wrench, when death comes and tears away from your embrace those who made the joy of life to you? In your thoughts of your dead, have you never experienced that strange hunger of the heart when you long to bring them back and fold them within the embrace of your affection? As you kneel in your grief by the fresh-made grave, and your thoughts go down into the low and dark abode where they are sleeping, you could with your very fingers scrape away the earth which hides them from your sight, in this longing to hold fellowship with them again. Well, our divine Redeemer is our Elder Brother, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh; and there in the heavens He feels the pulse of those human affections of which we are so distinctly conscious, and breaks out — I had almost said into the passionate cry, "Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am." Let it comfort you when you are called upon to give up your dead, that, if it break your fellowship with them and subject you to this strange hunger of love, you give them up to Jesus, whom you love more than you love yourself, and who has the same longing for their presence and society above. When death comes, as His messenger, over the threshold of your home, and says to you, as he touches with his skeleton finger child or parent, or husband or wife, "The Master hath need of them" — "loose them and let them go"; and lay the solace upon your heart that your Friend, who has redeemed both you and them, is longing for their society above. If they part from you, it is only that they may be folded within His arms and lay their aching heads upon His bosom forever.⁴

With good reason then, W. Hendriksen rhetorically asks: "Can anything equal the ineffable tenderness of this final request?"⁵

Jesus Desires Your Presence so that You Might See His Glory

Notice that Jesus gives a reason that he wants you to be with him: "that they may behold my glory which you have given me; for you loved me before the foundation of the world." The glory that he is referring to here is the same as that in John 17:1-5. This

⁴ Benjamin M. Palmer, *Sermons of Rev. B.M. Palmer* (Harrisonburg, Va.: Sprinkle Publications, 2002), 1:395-6.

⁵ Hendricksen, *John*, 366.

refers to his being clothed in splendor, honor and glory, which he had before he became a man, and now has received as the resurrected Savior.

The *Lord of the Rings* character Aragorn son of Arathorn provides a helpful illustration. In spite of the fact that he was the true heir to the throne of Gondor, most people did not know his true identity. He lived among them as a ranger, not as a king. After he and his friends conquered the wicked Sauron, Aragorn was crowned king in a beautiful coronation service before thousands. The once humble, obscure ranger was now clothed in great majesty. Those who had thought he was just a commoner came to realize that he was the king, and a great one at that.

Although Jesus came from heaven, he lived his life on earth in poverty and obscurity. Many did not realize who he was because his true glory was veiled. However, after the defeat of the wicked ruler of this world, Jesus was exalted to the right hand of the Father and crowned king of kings and lord of lords. In the words of the apostle Paul:

Though he was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

As the king, Jesus desires for you to be with him so that you might experience and see his exaltation and incomparable glory. Even as Aragorn craved for Arwen to be with him as he reigned in Gondor, so Jesus yearns for your company.

A college graduate wishes family and friends to be present at his graduation so that they might experience and share in his joy on that special day. Phil Mickelson had his family join him on the 18th tee after he made his final putt to win the 2005 PGA championship. Jesus does not want to be alone on his, as it were, day of graduation. He wishes for you to join him on the 18th tee. He wants you to witness and share in his joy as king.

Apparently, witnessing the glory of the Lord was David's hope as he wrote: "As for me, I will see your face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied when I awake in your likeness" (Ps. 17:15). "One thing I have desired of the Lord, that will I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord" (Ps. 27:4). And it is the hope of every saint according to 1 John 3:2-3. Samuel Rutherford once put it this way:

The King there in his beauty
Without a veil is seen;

It were a well-spent journey
 Though seven deaths lay between:
 The Lamb with his fair army
 Doth on Mount Zion stand,
 And glory, glory dwelleth
 In Emmanuel's land.⁶

There is a sense in which we can catch glimpses of Christ's glory now. The disciples did as they witnessed his miracles (John 2:11); and his death, resurrection and ascension (John 12:23-33). Christians in every generation still can behold Christ's glory in part, as 2 Corinthians 3:18 says: "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord." So we see in part now, but we will see in full when we shall be forever with the Lord.

But there is a day coming when we will not only see Christ's glory in its fullness but we will also share in it!⁷ We will all graduate! We will all stand on the podium! We will all partake of Christ's glory!

Now if we are children, then we are heirs — heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us (Rom. 8:17-18; cf. 1 Pet. 5:1).

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory (2 Cor. 4:17).

Jesus craves for you to be with him so that you might share in his glory! Simply amazing!

Jesus Saves You so that You Can Be with Him

Now, in order for Jesus' wish to come true, he must first thoroughly save you. You need to be redeemed from top to bottom, head to toe, inside and out. This is because God is righteous.

Notice the attribute Jesus ascribed to the Father as he prayed: "O *righteous* Father!" Jesus expected the Father to answer his request in a righteous way. Jesus knew that God would be unjust or unrighteous if he glorified any that had not believed in

⁶ Stanza 2 of the hymn *The Sands of Time Are Sinking*.

⁷ F.F. Bruce comments, "Now [Jesus] prays that his followers may behold this glory and, by implication, have a share in it. If the gift of glory to the Son is the token of the Father's love for him, those who share that love will naturally share the glory" (*The Gospel of John*, [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983], 336).

his Son (John 6:40). Because God is holy, only those who are holy can dwell in his presence.

This lesson, of course, was ingrained into the minds of every faithful Israelite in the Old Testament. The Law taught that Israel had to be cleansed and sanctified before they could approach God. They had to be holy for God to dwell in their midst (Lev. 26). Likewise, the author of Hebrews declared that without holiness, no one will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14). It is not that wicked, rebellious people cannot be with Christ — they can, but only if they are first changed. They need to come to faith in Christ and to be made righteous!

In light of this, you can see that John 17:25-26 serves as the grounds or reasons that the Father should grant Jesus' request in John 17:24. The world has not known the Father, and so it has no right to be in his presence. But Jesus is not praying for the world (John 17:9); he is praying for his disciples and for all that the Father has given him. And to them he has made the Father known, and he will continue (by His Spirit) to do so. In other words, he will not just bring them to faith; he will also fully sanctify them.

The result of Christ's work will be twofold: 1) the love the Father has for Jesus will be in them; and 2) Christ will be in them (John 17:26). Jesus will make sure that we know the Father so well that we will love one another with the same love that the Father has for Jesus. In addition, the heart of the covenant will be realized in us, for God in Christ will dwell among us and be our God.

Thus, it seems to me that Jesus is simply asking the Father to grant his request of your presence on the basis that he will carry out the promise of the new covenant. A very brief statement of the history of Old Testament Israel will, I think, help bring this out.

When the Lord graciously redeemed Israel out of Egypt and brought them to himself, he said,

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to me above all peoples; for all the earth is mine. And you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod. 19:5-6).

Elsewhere the Lord declared,

If you walk in my statutes and keep my commandments, and perform them, then ... I will set my tabernacle among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. I will walk among you and be your God, and you shall be my people (Lev. 26:3-12).

As a whole, Israel disobeyed the Lord's voice and did not keep his covenant or walk in his statutes. She was stubborn and stiff-necked, refusing to turn away from her

idols to the living God. This lack of faith and repentance led to her expulsion from the Promised Land, which was a type of heaven (Hos. 11:5; 1 Kings 8:46-53; 2 Kings 17:7-18).

It is in this situation that the Lord declares that he will make a new covenant:

This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, "Know the Lord," for they all shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more (Jer. 31:33-34).

The problem with Old Testament Israel is that they did not know the Lord. Even though they claimed to serve the Lord, as did the Scribes and Pharisees, their lives indicated otherwise. This is why both Old Testament Israel and Israel in Christ's day were judged by the Lord and cast out of the Land.

Jesus asks the Father for his people to be with him, which is the opposite of being condemned and cast out. And the basis of his request is that he will make the Father known and will continue to do so to his people, the church. No more shall every man say to his brother, "Know the Lord." Christ himself will make the Father known.

One can also see the similarity between Jesus' prayer and the promise of the new covenant when one understands the relationship between knowing God, the law and love. The law of God is an expression of God's holy character. Knowing God is defined in Scripture as keeping his commandments (Jer. 22:15-16; 1 John 2:3-4). Loving your neighbor is the fulfillment of law. Therefore, he who loves his neighbor is he who keeps the law. He who keeps the law is he who knows God.

Now, here in our text, Christ says that he will make the Father known to us so that we will love one another with the same love the Father has for Jesus. This means that we will be law keepers, not law breakers. How will he do this? He will do it by writing the law on our hearts so that it is our very nature to trust in the Lord and keep his commandments. And then God will be our God and we shall be his people. Is this not the glory of the new covenant (2 Cor. 3)?

Jesus will save you thoroughly and completely. He will justify and sanctify you. He will write his law on your heart and put his Spirit within you so that you might be a covenant keeper, as opposed to a covenant breaker like Old Testament Israel. He will make you holy as he is holy. And this he will surely do because of his desire that you are where he is!

Conclusion

Can you see why John Knox had this passage of Scripture read to him every day while he was on his deathbed? Can you see why this last section would have been especially comforting to him? For here we read of Jesus' burning passion for our presence. He wants you to be with him and see his glory. Heaven would not be the same with your absence. He makes sure that you not only have the right to heaven but also are made fit for heaven so that you might be by his side. Oh, how he must love you!