

~Script: Pastor Frank R. Johnson~

If I Could Pray for You Like Jesus “Establishing a Foundation for Prayer” (John 17:1-5)

Take a first look.

I. MUCH BUZZ ABOUT PRAYER happened right after the turn of the millennium upon the release of a little book by Bruce Wilkinson entitled *The Prayer of Jabez*. Brother Bruce reveals that he adopted this prayer as his daily watchword early in his life, and that God had done for him what He did for Jabez. That prayer is embedded in the narrative of the Old Covenant Scriptures in the book of 1 Chronicles. Here is how the context reads and how that prayer goes (this is 1 Chronicles 4:9-10): “*Jabez was more honorable than his brothers. His mother had named him Jabez, saying, ‘I gave birth to him in pain.’ Jabez cried out to the God of Israel, ‘Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain.’ And God granted his request.*” The name *Jabez* sounds like the Hebrew word for *pain*, so this is essentially a prayer to overcome the dire and depressing circumstances of his birth. His mother gave him a name that reminded her of pain. How would we like this name: “Hey, Pain! It’s time to get cleaned up for dinner!” All who read Brother Bruce’s book should go to the text and meditate on the historical and literary context before beginning to recite such a prayer as a Christian (or Jewish) mantra. I have probably said enough about *The Prayer of Jabez*. Well, OK, one more. I did brainstorm some new titles for variations of the book. As you might know, there were several editions morphed for marketing. *The Prayer of Jabez for Children*, *The Prayer of Jabez for Teens* and so on. I thought they could have gone a bit further with this. How about *The Prayer of Jabez for One-armed Men with Poor Eyesight*? Or, *The Prayer of Jabez for Scullery Maids* (although they might want to reverse the prayer and ask that God would *reduce* their territory to clean and tidy up). And it goes on and on. ☺ I hope you (and Brother Bruce Wilkinson) don’t mind a little good-natured kidding about such things.

II. AT PRESENT, I WANT TO CALL YOUR ATTENTION TO A BETTER PRAYER for meditation, for study and for adoption in its essential meaning for the life of prayer. We don’t know anything else about Jabez and his prayer than what we have in 1 Chronicles 4:9-10. He is a small player in the dramatic narrative of human salvation. The star of the whole dramatic production, however, is our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Not only did He teach His disciples both how and what to pray, He offered prayer in such a manner that we would do well to hear it, meditate on it and put into practice what we learn from it.

I compel you today to give your attention to the True Prayer of Jesus Christ, His high-priestly prayer recorded in John 17. Here is where we can listen in to the most intimate of conversations, between the Father and Son in the Godhead. If we can’t learn from Jesus’ living witness here, we are unteachable. I commend this text to you for your ongoing meditation, at least for the next few weeks. Let’s take it out each day, perhaps rotating whatever translations of the Bible you have at our disposal, and read it carefully, either in the morning or the evening.

We will pause to ponder its truth on the following several Sundays. We will sit at the feet of Jesus ourselves and learning from His example. At this moment of transition, if I could pray for you like Jesus, I would offer a prayer something like this.

III. TODAY, WE WILL ESTABLISH A FOUNDATION FOR PRAYER. We will observe what it was that Jesus mentioned first in the longest recorded prayer we have from Jesus Himself.

Take a closer look.

I. ESTABLISHING A FOUNDATION OF RELATIONSHIP: Jesus prayed, “Father,”

1. *Jesus prayed to the Father in His prayer.* This is significant. He could have addressed the Almighty in any way conceivable, but He chose this relational term because it conveys the truth in ways that others don’t. He could have said, “Almighty God.” That would have been true. He could have said, “Creator of all outside Yourself.” That, too, is true enough. He could have begun, “Lord of all,” because that is what God is, the Boss (capital “B”). He could have said, “Oh, Ground of all being,” but God had not allowed Paul Tillich, the liberal theologian of the mid-20th century, to be born as yet.

I—He could have used the expression that I read in a Wayne Stayskal cartoon a few years back. In the cartoon, a large, robed pastor-type is standing in the pulpit holding a very large Bible that is labeled “NCC Bible, Sexist Words Removed.” The man is saying, “And now let us all pray to the great To Whom It May Concern.” But our Lord Jesus did not begin His prayer in this manner, either. He called upon His *Father*. This established the basic terms of the relationship being nurtured through prayer.

I realize that the word “father” doesn’t mean the same thing to everyone. To some it means “the guy who abandoned the family when I was a young person and who never comes around to see us.” Or it might mean, “the guy who makes promise after promise but never comes through.” Remember, when Jesus called God His Father, He was addressing the One Who both loves and guides and corrects us with our ultimate and eternal best at heart. This is how He has revealed Himself. He is just like Jesus.

Remember what John said about Him in the first chapter of His gospel? Here it is: John 1:14: “*The Word [a prophetic title for Jesus Christ] became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*” And again in John 1:18: “*No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.*” What is it that Jesus, the Word, has made known? The very nature of God the Father. And what was Jesus like? He was “full of grace and truth.”

So Jesus addressed this One, calling Him *Father*, who also is full of grace and truth.

2. *He taught His followers to do the same.* See Matthew 6:9 and Luke 11:2. Matthew records (in chapter 6) that Jesus gave the prayer recorded in the Sermon on the Mount as a *model* for developing the life of prayer. He introduced it with “pray *like this*” Luke, on the other hand (in chapter 11), records Jesus giving almost the same teaching as a prayer that can and should be offered in the very words presented. He quotes Jesus as introducing the prayer in this way: “When you pray, say” In both, the prayer begins with “Father.” This is the essential relational comparison that should describe that between the follower of Jesus Christ and God. It is a relationship between a humble seeking child and a powerful but loving parent, the kind of parent that each of us should aspire to be like but which we can never perfectly become in this life.

Insight: Prayer is the nurturing of an intimate relationship between child and Father. If I could ask God anything for you, it would be this: that each of you have this relationship with God.

—Is this not the heart's cry that drives the soul to pray? We want to go deeper with God! We want to know that we are loved and that our love for Him will not be empty of meaning.

It strikes me that many people are looking for just this, even if they don't know that they should seek it from God. Some years ago now, I read a portion of an interview with female pop-rock artist **Sheryl Crow**. She told about her own longing for the kind of relationship which we would affirm that God alone can offer. Here is what she said: "I think everybody on the planet feels alone, even when they're in the greatest relationships or surrounded by family. In fact, in many ways, when you're with someone you care about, you feel more alone than if you were by yourself.... I don't want to spend the rest of my life alone. That's the only true fear I have, because what else is there but love? Not to sound completely elementary, but it's what people have written songs about for hundreds of years, and it's really the only thing that matters. It's what motivates you, edifies you, encourages you. It's what brings you the most joy and the most wisdom. So that is what I long for—the consummate love."¹

Sheryl, and each of us, must find this in the living God! The great disappointment of all human experience comes right here. No other human being can be for us "the consummate love." We all fail at some point, or at any given time at every point, to love with the self-giving eternal purposes of the living God. Prayer is the cultivating of such a love-relationship, initiated by God Himself, as the Prayer of Jesus Christ demonstrates. Maybe Sheryl is getting closer to this love, as she recorded a song with the CCM artist TobyMac a couple of years ago. We should pray for her, too.

II. ESTABLISHING A FOUNDATION OF RECIPROCITY: Jesus prayed, "Glorify Your Son as Your Son glorifies You."

This is the foundation of the give-and-take of true Christian prayer.

1. *Jesus asked that He would be glorified as with the glory He shared with the Father before the creation of the world.* Note vv. 1, 4-5. This is a significant request. For one thing, it assumes that Jesus shared in the glory of the Father since before the creation of the world. This is echoed in John 1:1-3, where Jesus is called "the Word" (λόγος, *logos*, in Greek). Hear it again in the present context: "¹ *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* ² *He was with God in the beginning.*

³ *Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made"* (**John 1:1-3, NIV**). This is the glory of sharing in the very nature of God and the creation of everything else outside of God: "*all things* were made through him." Here is the first side of the reciprocity of prayer. Jesus asked that the Father would bring glory upon Him.

2. *He also noted that He had glorified the Father while on the earth.* This statement is the reverse of the former, which completes the reciprocity. Jesus asks for the glory of the Father to return to Him again. But he says, "I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do" (ESV, v. 4). This is a simple statement. What exactly was Jesus referring to when He said, "I glorified you on earth"? The tense of the verb is the aorist, which is often translated as a simple past tense. What was he referring to here? We must understand this in light of what John has already told us. Again, in chapter 1 of John's gospel, he said, "*No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.*" How had Jesus finished the work the Father had given Him to do? He had revealed the nature of the Father, full of grace and truth, to the world. He was about to bring this work to its

¹ *Interview* magazine (10-01-98); submitted by Mike Herman, Glen Ellyn, Illinois, to PreachingToday.com.

ultimate completion as He died on the cross for the sins of the world, offering Himself to God as the final sacrifice.

Insight: Prayer draws the believer into the glory of God through Jesus Christ His Son, while it is also a means of seeking to give glory to Him, as well.

I—Prayer is seeking the blessing of God while at the same time pledging to allow God complete freedom to work in and through our lives according to His good purposes.

When we enter prayer in this way, we enter into the two-directional traffic of God's working in the world. He desires to do a God-shaped work in each of our lives. We offer to let Him.

Oswald Chambers said it like this: "Every time we pray, our horizon is altered, our attitude to things is altered, not sometimes but every time, and the amazing thing is that we don't pray more."²

We are seeking the glory of God in our prayers. God is seeking to draw us up into His glory. Proper prayer invites God to empower our lives in such a way that we will be unable to impede His progress of doing just that. When we pray as Jesus prayed, we are opening a door that truly brings a change to our horizons and an alteration to our attitudes.

Why do we shrink back from this? Could it be that our capacity to receive the glory of God is small? Remember the story of Moses and how he went into the tent of meeting and communed with God there? We are told in the Scriptures that Moses would go into the tent and the glory of Yahweh would descend upon the tent while he was inside. The Lord would meet with Moses. When Moses came out, his face would be shining, so much so that it struck terror in the hearts of the people. So Moses would wear a veil over his face until the shine wore off. The people could only handle so much of the reflected glory of the Lord. Could this be our problem? Is this why we don't pray more? We ask that we will share in His glory, but do we also state, "I have given you glory on the earth"?

To pray in both ways is to establish the foundation of reciprocity, the give-and-take of this relationship of love that is nurtured in true prayer.

III. ESTABLISHING A FOUNDATION OF RESPONSIBILITY: Jesus prayed, "You have given Him authority" "I glorified You on earth."

1. *Jesus received the authority that He had been given from the Father.* In His prayer, Jesus affirmed this authority and embraced it with His whole heart.

2. *Jesus also confirmed that He had accomplished what the Father had sent Him to do.* How was it that Jesus brought glory to the Father on the earth? He had accomplished the work He was sent to do. We have already pondered what that work was. He had come to reveal the Father. He had come to redeem humanity. The one had already been done. In His preaching, teaching, and healing Jesus had revealed the Father. That is why the request of Philip was doubtless a sad one for Jesus to hear: "Show us the Father and it will suffice." His response was with pathos: "I am with you for such a time and you do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How is it you are saying, 'Show us the Father'?" Jesus had accomplished His work of revelation.

The other work, the redemption of humanity, was as good as done. He was so sure of the completion of His work of redemption that He could speak of it as though it were already accomplished. He was truly "the Lamb slain before the creation of the world" (see Revelation 13:8). When the first word of creation was spoken, the necessity of the cross of Christ was in

² Oswald Chambers. *Leadership*, Vol. 16, no. 3.

the mind of God. He spoke that creative word anyway. He knew what it would cost Him. He was already prepared to pay that cost. This is the greatness of the love and eternal purposes of our God.

Jesus entered fully into the eternal purposes of the Father when He offered this prayer. We must do the same.

Insight: Prayer is a means of affirming and receiving help from God to accomplish His calling upon the believer's life.

I—Henri Nouwen was a Catholic Christian who spent a significant time in his life probing what it means to commune with the Lord while doing acts of humble service. He passed away several years ago. In his book *Reaching Out*, Nouwen wrote, “The paradox of prayer is that it asks for a serious effort while it can only be received as a gift. We cannot plan, organize, or manipulate God; but without a careful discipline, we cannot receive him either.”³

The careful discipline takes seriously the calling of God upon our lives. It is no accident that we are here today and that we have are concerned about a relationship with the Almighty. Not only was Jesus’ purpose established before the creation of the world, so was the purpose of Christians. According to the inspired writings of Paul, “(God) chose us in (Christ) before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him” (Ephesians 1:4, ESV).

Prayer opens the heart to hear from God, to enter more fully into His eternal purposes, to receive the unlikely and amazing grace that invites us to participate materially in those eternal purposes and to enter God’s glory as a result.

IV. ESTABLISHING A FOUNDATION OF RESULT: Jesus prayed, “... That they may know You the only true God and Jesus Christ Whom You have sent.”

1. *The fulfillment of Jesus’ practice of authority is clearly to give “eternal life” to human beings.* He said so in the same sentence. Verse two makes this clear: “Just as You gave to Him authority over all flesh, in order that all whom You gave to Him he might give to them eternal life” (literal translation). What was the purpose of His authority? It was so that He would be in the position necessary to give eternal life to all whom God had given to the Son.

It is important to note here that His authority is not just an authority to pass sentence on rebellious human beings who refuse to turn in faith to the Son of God. That is affirmed elsewhere and is true. Here, in this High-priestly prayer, Jesus confirms the positive role of His authority, the role that was demonstrated so frequently in His short but deep physical ministry (of around two-four years). He came to give people what they could not get from anywhere else: eternal life, healing, a new beginning, freedom from the past and hope for the future.

2. *This eternal life is defined as a relationship: “that they may know you the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”* “This is the eternal life,” Jesus said. There is no eternal life apart from knowing God and knowing the Son of God, according to Jesus. This is the whole direction of what He came to accomplish. How is the Father revealed? “Full of grace and truth.” He has revealed the truth that demonstrates our need of Him and of His great salvation, the grace that offers it to us based on the work of Jesus Christ rather than on our ability to earn it. His work of revelation and of redemption moved toward this human end: “eternal life, that (we) may know (Him) the only true God and Jesus Christ Whom He sent.”

³ Henri J.M. Nouwen in *Reaching Out. Christianity Today*, Vol. 32, no. 6.

Insight: Prayer draws us into this one central human purpose of the work of Jesus Christ, to bring us into the realm of eternal life in knowing God.

I—A follower named O. Hallesby has made this observation. He compares prayer to the air we breathe: “The air which our body requires envelops us on every hand. The air of itself seeks to enter our bodies and, for this reason, exerts pressure upon us. It is well known that it is more difficult to hold one’s breath than it is to breathe. We need but exercise our organs of respiration, and air will enter forthwith into our lungs and perform its life-giving function to the entire body.

“The air which our souls need also envelops all of us at all times and on all sides. God is round about us in Christ on every hand, with his many-sided and all-sufficient grace. All we need to do is to open our hearts.”⁴

~Take it home (applications)~

I. HOW IS OUR FOUNDATION IN PRAYER?

1. Are we laying the proper foundation of *relationship*? Are we going deeper in a walk of faith and love?

2. Are we laying the proper foundation of *reciprocity*? Are we asking for the glory of God to rest upon us because we are fully receiving and obeying the call of God upon our lives?

3. Are we laying the proper foundation of *responsibility*? Are we exercising our authority in Christ through prayer to receive the strength we need to carry out God’s calling?

4. Are we laying the proper foundation of *result*? Are we seeking to grow in and to lead others into that eternal life, which is *knowing* the one true God and Jesus Christ, the One He sent to be the Savior of the world?

II. HOW DO WE NEED TO ALLOW GOD’S SPIRIT TO SHAPE OUR LIVING AND PRAYING ACCORDINGLY?

⁴ O. Hallesby in *Prayer. Christianity Today*, Vol. 38, no. 9.