

John 17:13-19 Why does Jesus pray for His followers?

Introduction

‘Jesus is for the English, Krishna is for Indians’- a total stranger hurled these words on a railway platform in India in the direction of Baptist pastor Benjamin Francis not too long ago. In front of a large number of people who had heard these words- what kind of response ought he to have given? If some kind of challenge was put to you or me this week in a public place –how ought we to respond? At the time he heard his mouth declaring to the other man that what he said was not true. Then uttering a challenge to the Hindu man- ‘What has Krishna done for you please tell me I would love to listen?’ ‘Then I will tell you what Jesus has done for me’. The man had nothing to say and in front of all those people Benjamin gave part of his testimony to a respectful quiet audience. Astonishingly after sharing what God had done in his life quite a number gave a round of applause –completely unexpected. It was a brief unplanned encounter with complete strangers; only God knows how that exchange might be significant for one person or a number of people’s lives amongst the many who heard those words that day. Who might God send across your pathway this coming week?

The ultimate question for each person to answer is the one that is fundamental to our existence: Why am I here? What purpose is there to my life? Does my life have significance or is it simply pure chance that I was conceived at a particular moment in time some years ago? The child of God has a clear response to give to these questions because as human beings created in the image of God we are relational creatures intended to live a purposeful life in fellowship both with our great God and Saviour and with our fellow human beings. Therefore our lives do count. The apparently ordinary encounters we have with other people might be moments of great significance tomorrow at work, or in some social context, for example. The reason for our existence here on earth is directly connected to the reason why Jesus is praying for you and me today- a pattern of behaviour He has demonstrated since He returned to heaven after His ascension two thousand years ago. It is a primary activity in His heavenly life until the day He returns as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords to usher in God’s new world at the end of the age. What is the motivation behind His prayer for you and me?

1. That we may be empowered by His resources in the world (John 17:13-16)

¹³ ‘I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of My joy within them. ¹⁴ I have given them Your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. ¹⁵ My prayer is not that You take them out of the world but that You protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.

(a) **The context of our ministries** In John’s Gospel in particular Jesus uses the word ‘world’ on many occasions and with a large variety of different meanings. Here in John 17 alone this word crops up nineteen times and with at least three distinctive meanings. Jesus saw no point in His followers seeking to live like secluded hermits attempting to avoid contamination with sinful people or practices. He wanted us to grasp that we by contrast can have an impact for good amongst those around us. Yet this was combined with a realistic appraisal of the challenges His followers would face in seeking to live God-honouring lives. In John 17:5 Jesus speaks of **the created world**, the beautiful planet on which we live and from which we can derive much pleasure as we experience the wonders of the natural world. God took pleasure in creating the world for His and our enjoyment, preparing for us an environment in which we might have a quality life. Do you take a little time to enjoy the wonders of this creation? To take a walk and delight in the views, the plants and animals and the rest of the

created order; yet this is the stage on which we live –not a primary issue for Jesus’ intercession here. In John 17:18 there is a second use of the term ‘world’. Here a more specific reference is given to **humanity** as distinct from the rest of creation. Although we have a responsibility to care for the wider creation (Genesis 1:28-30; 2:15; Psalm 8:6-8; for example) yet our primary calling is to the people we meet day by day. *As You sent Me into the world, I have sent them into the world* (John 17:18). In some Christian circles members are positively discouraged from spending time with as yet unconverted relatives and friends or taking employment where the majority of colleagues don’t share their faith. However, this was the opposite of Jesus’ intentions for His followers. He wanted us to be a transforming influence for good on those around us. For example in Matthew 5:13-16 Jesus said: ¹³ *‘You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.’* ¹⁴ *‘You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden.’* ¹⁵ *Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.’* ¹⁶ *In the same way, **let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.*** Each of us has a particular group of people with whom we interact on a regular basis. Jesus is praying that each one of us may however faintly represent something of Him in the way we relate to other people, with a view to them also putting their faith and trust in Him. Our place of work, for which we thank the Lord in a time of economic recession when so many people cannot find meaningful employment, is not just a place to earn wages to pay the bills, but also a mission-field where through our lives, and when appropriate through our words, we can be effective ambassadors for Him. Do you need to think afresh about how God views the people with whom you mix day by day throughout the week? Be encouraged as you grasp that the Lord Jesus is praying for you in each of those social interactions. There is, though, also a **third usage** of the term ‘world’ here by Jesus, representing ‘**spiritual forces or values opposed to God and all that He stands for**’. John 17:6: *I have revealed You to those whom You gave Me **out of the world**.* John 17:14: *I have given them Your word and **the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world.*** Jesus wants us as His followers to appreciate that physically we are in the world with the rest of humanity, however, in spiritual terms there is a conflict as there are others who hold to philosophies or values that stand in direct contradiction to the ones we hold dear. We are involved in a spiritual battle. Sometimes we are shocked at the intensity of the hatred revealed by some people towards the convictions we hold. Around the world year on year it is not a surprise that more Christians are martyred for their faith than proponents of other religions. This is not simply because there are more of us in numerical terms, but because the gospel of the Prince of Peace is so contrary to the convictions of some people around us. Time and again Jesus stressed this point. As early as John 3:19-21, after the simple statement of the gospel message earlier in that chapter, Jesus declared: *This is the verdict: light has come into the world, **but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.*** ²⁰ *Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed.* ²¹ *But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.* As a result of this reality Jesus at the Last Supper plainly told His followers what they would face in years to come. John 15:18-21: ¹⁸ ***‘If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated Me first.’*** ¹⁹ *If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you **out of the world.** That is why the world hates you.* ²⁰ *Remember what I told you: “A servant is not greater than his master.” If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed My teaching, they will obey yours also.* ²¹ *They will treat you this way because of My name, for they do not know the one who sent Me.* However, He didn’t say this to discourage them, but in order to honestly and openly explain the nature of the spiritual battle we face in following Him. However, the final victory has already been won by Jesus so however bleak and difficult things may appear on occasions we know the final chapter of

the story. Jesus reminded them: *I have told you these things, so that in Me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world*' (John 16:33).

(b) **The resources Jesus gives us to overcome the world** (i) **His joy** (John 17:13) *'I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of My joy within them.* Joy is not the same as happiness. The latter is based on our feelings which can be up or down depending on our mood or circumstances. The Lord never promises us endless years of abundant unceasing happiness this side of eternity. Three Sundays ago, for example, I heard news of the deaths of two Christian ladies I know, younger than me who had died leaving husbands and children behind. Although I knew they were with the Lord, it did not take away the sense of deep sadness at what their deaths meant in those families. The list of life circumstances that causes distress or heartache is a lengthy one, and that's well before we come to add to it those suffering financial hardships in the economic recession and a host of other difficulties. Isaiah 53:3 in a prophetic description of Jesus described Him as *a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering.* As Christians we are called to stand with other people in the range of life's circumstances. Paul in Romans 12:15 wrote: *Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those that mourn.* An Arab proverb states: 'All sunshine makes a desert'. We only appreciate the good things in life because we also experience the opposite as well. We can be ecstatic at passing an exam or succeeding at a job interview or elated at having the financial resources to pay a bill because we have known the reality of the opposite of those outcomes. Joy in biblical terms is the settled conviction of being in the centre of God's will; of having the assurance that the Lord is with us despite all the powers of hell doing their worst around us. It is knowing that we are never alone because the Lord is always with us. The nature of their joy was explained by Jesus in John 16:20-22, in a context where He has explained that He needs to leave them physically as part of God's plan: ²⁰*Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy.* ²¹*A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world.* ²²*So with you: now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.* Jesus also assured His disciples that evening of His peace and His love. John 14:27: *Peace I leave with you; My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.* John 15:9: *As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you. Now remain in My love.* This is an incredible statement, but it's a promise for present day disciples as well. These are some of the fruit that are experienced by the child of God indwelt by His Holy Spirit. Do you need to rest more in these blessings from Jesus? Do you need to ask for a greater experience of what He is offering here to each one of His children? (ii) **His Word** (John 17:14a) *I have given them Your word and the world has hated them...* Earlier in John 17:8 Jesus uttered these words in His prayer: *For I gave them the words You gave Me and they accepted them.* The Bible is not merely a religious book with the pious words of believing people. By contrast it is the revelation of God expressed in human language but recorded with great accuracy the truth God intended His children to receive. There are people who think we are foolish for accepting the Bible as The Word of God. The evil one has blinded their spiritual eyes from grasping the significance of the Scriptures. What the Bible says, God says! We need to remember people place value on things according to their perspective on life. John in his first letter made reference to this point. *Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them.* ¹⁶*For everything in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – comes not from the Father but from the world.* ¹⁷*The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives for ever.* Other forms of knowledge can so easily be changed, but God's Word is always reliable. Peter, quoting the prophet Isaiah wrote: *For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.* ²⁴*For, 'All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the*

flowers fall,²⁵ **but the word of the Lord endures for ever.**’ And this is the word that was preached to you (I Peter 1:23-25). The same word of God through which the world came into being upholds and sustains it (Psalm 33:6, 9 *By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, their starry host by the breath of His mouth...⁹ For He spoke, and it came to be; He commanded, and it stood firm.*) upholds and sustains it (see also 2 Peter 3:5-7).

By contrast Paul warns about the dangers of the wisdom of this world that is of worldviews and philosophies that are based on premises that take no account of God and His purposes for the world as its creator and redeemer. I Corinthians 1:20b-21 states: *Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know Him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.* There is no neutral territory here. James informed his readers in James 4:4: *...you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.* Sensible and right-thinking people wince at the outrageous prose of Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens, two of Britain’s best known apologists for hardline atheism, but at one level they are within their rights to express such an opinion, because the Word of God is either what it claims to be or it is not. If it is true then it is the ultimate act of folly not to live by it, but if not then why live with its moral boundaries and convictions about good and evil, right and wrong, if these are simply the constructs of religious people recorded over the last few millennia. Therefore, it is no surprise that we appear to be foolish in the eyes of some people, as Paul indicated of his own experience on occasions (I Corinthians 4:9-10a: *For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings. ¹⁰We are fools for Christ... A choice has to be made.*) Psalm 1 sets it out so clearly. *Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, ²but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on His law day and night. ³That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither – whatever they do prospers. ⁴Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. ⁵Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. ⁶For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.* We have a choice to make – will we accept His Word and live in the light of its promises?

(iii) **Our Union with Christ** (John 17:14b,16) *for they are **not of the world any more than I am of the world...***¹⁶ *They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.* John highlights our identification with Jesus in his writings. I John 1:7: *But if we walk in the light, **as He is in the light**, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin.* I John 2:5-6: *But if anyone obeys His word, love for God is truly made complete in them. **This is how we know we are in Him:** ⁶**whoever claims to live in Him must live as Jesus did.*** I John 3:7: *Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. The one who does what is right is righteous, **just as He is righteous.*** In summary John writes in I John 4:17 (English Standard Version) *By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, **because as He is so also are we** in this world.* Paul, in words of testimony in Galatians 2:20 declared: *I have been crucified with Christ and **I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.** The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.* What powerful and challenging words. This will have a price attached as Jesus reminded the disciples that evening in John 15:18-21: *If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated Me first. ¹⁹If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. ²⁰Remember what I told you: “A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed My teaching, they will obey yours also. ²¹**They will treat you this way because of My name, for they do not know the one who sent me.*** However, saving the best to last Paul told Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:11-13: *Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with Him, we will also live with Him; ¹²if we endure, we will also reign with Him. If we disown Him, He will also disown us;*

¹³ if we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot disown Himself. Be encouraged we are in this together with Jesus. United with Him we will be victorious, for His glory's sake.

2. **That we may live holy lives in the world** (John 17:17-19)

¹⁷ Sanctify them by the truth; Your word is truth. ¹⁸ As You sent Me into the world, I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ For them I sanctify Myself, that they too may be truly sanctified. (John 17:13-19)

(a) **What does it mean to be holy or sanctified?** The most common name for Christians in the New Testament is *saints*. It has a sense of being separated from something (sin) and to something (God) in the choices we make. Both actions are conscious choices that are part of Christian discipleship. In the Old Testament Genesis 2:3 tells us that *God blessed the seventh day and made it holy*. He made the conscious choice not to do regular work tasks and enjoyed a break from His labours. Exodus 20:8-11 confirmed that God was acting here as a role model for His people. The first-born child or offspring of animals owned by Israelites were also set apart as holy (Exodus 13:2); likewise the Tabernacle in the desert and the Temple (Exodus 25: II Chronicles 20: 8); the whole nation were declared holy unto the Lord (Exodus 31:13); in particular the priests set apart for their particular ministries (Leviticus 21:8). In the New Testament era Paul expressed it this way in I Corinthians 1:2: *To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be His holy people*. In I Corinthians 6:19-20 he went further with reference to individual lifestyle choices and said these words: *Do you not know that your bodies are temples [word used for the 'Holy of Holies' in the Temple] of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰ you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your bodies*. This is something we have to work at it doesn't happen overnight or through a one-off experience of the Holy Spirit. It comes from self-discipline. Paul explained it in this way to the Christians in Rome in Romans 6:19: *I am using an example from everyday life because of your human limitations. Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now **offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness***. It is something we need help with from the Lord. Paul prayed in this way for the Christians at Thessalonica: ***May God Himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through***. *May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ* (I Thessalonians 5:23). The apostle's hope here is similar to that of John who declared in his first letter: *But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as he is.* ³ *All who have this hope in Him purify themselves, just as He is pure* (I John 3:2b-3). The challenge for us is this: Do I recognise my position in Christ as a calling to holy living? In practice am I sufficiently self-disciplined in my thoughts, my speech and my conduct to reflect who I am called to be in Christ? Is there an area of my personal life on which I need to ask God to help me improve?

(b) **What is the means of sanctification?** John 17:17: *Sanctify them by the truth; Your word is truth*. Philosophers may debate whether there is such a thing as objective truth –that is something that is intrinsically true, rather than something that a person rightly or wrongly believes to be true –which can be completely different. Relativism is very popular in Western culture. When I was in a teacher training college in the 1980s we were taught to put aside notions of Standard English; the different forms spoken and written were of equal validity. I'm not sure how many people believed that at the time. It is simply incorrect. Precision in language can be of vital importance. The Bible emphasises absolute or objective truth. David in Psalm 31:5 cried out: *redeem me O Lord, the God of truth*. In II Samuel 7:28 David in a prayer repeated this conviction: *Sovereign Lord, You are God! **Your covenant is trustworthy, and You have promised these good things to your servant***. Jesus who came as God in human flesh was *full of grace and truth* (John 1:14b). To His followers at the Last Supper Jesus emphasised: *I AM...the truth* (John 14:6). It was intrinsic to His personhood. He described the One who

would replace Him in John 14:17 as *the Spirit of truth*. The written Word of God reflects the incarnate Word of God –Jesus- in its emphasis on reporting the truth. In Psalm 119 the Psalmist makes this plea to God: *Do not snatch the word of truth from my mouth* (Psalm 119:43). He also declared: *Yet You are near, O Lord, and all your commands are true* (Psalm 119:151). The written Word of God which is truth, reflects accurately the God who revealed it to its human authors and is therefore, the ideal vehicle for enabling us not only to believe the truth but to endeavour to the best of our ability to live it out in our daily lives. To read, meditate on and obey the truth of Scripture will over time inevitably bring us closer to reflecting the image of the One who is The Truth- this will make us more like Jesus. The question for us is this- do I desire enough to be like Him? Am I investing enough time and effort for the Word of God to shape my patterns of thinking or to influence my priorities in choices for action? Jesus is praying to this end.

(c) **What is the motive for sanctification?** (John 17:18) ¹⁸ *As You sent Me into the world, I have sent them into the world.* It must lead to service. Jesus was the holiest person who walked this earth. Hebrews 7:26 records that He is *holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.* Yet equally as the critical crowd in Jericho reported in Luke 19:7: *All the people saw this and began to mutter. He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.* Praise God He did otherwise Zacchaeus might never have had a meaningful presentation of the Gospel. We are all saved to serve. To what ministry or mission have you been set apart or prepared by God? For some it is overseas service. Acts 13:2, reporting from the Church in Syrian Antioch, recorded: *While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”* ³ *So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.* Are you making the best use of the gifts God has given you? We are called by God to be a holy people and Jesus is praying to that end, but in order that we might be available in His service. Take time to read Isaiah 6 and his call to service. Only when he and we are serious about being who God calls us to be can the next step of service be undertaken.

(d) **Who is our model for sanctification?** (John 17:19) ¹⁹ *For them I sanctify Myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.* Jesus is our role model. He took this role in order to show us, His followers in each generation how to live. The challenge then comes to us: how well am I following Jesus? Paul could write these astonishing words: *Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ* (I Corinthians 11:1). Or does a more basic question need to be asked? Who are you following in practice today? Whose praise do you seek? Whose example influences you most? In terms of others looking at our lives –do we need to ask – if other people copied my priorities and example –what would the world be like? What would this Church be like? Our calling is to keep our eyes fixed on the only true role model Jesus Himself. May He inspire, enable and equip us to be like Him and to persuade and influence other people to follow Him as well, Amen.