

God Came Down

(The Fourth Gospel)

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Third Farewell Discourse [Jesus' Prayer] (17:1-26)

We now come to the last part of the farewell discourse material. This material is actually not a discourse; rather, it is a prayer consisting of three parts: Jesus prays for himself (17:1-5), which is introduced with the expression, "he lifted his eyes to heaven and said." He then prays for the eleven disciples (17:6-19), which is clear from the statement of verse 9, "I am praying for them;" and he prays for all believers (17:20-26), which is introduced by the words, "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word."

The "farewell discourse" material John has preserved for us here has a tradition underlying it in Jewish literature. There are numerous precedents of the farewell discourse in Scripture. In fact, one of the major Pseudepigraphal writings of Judaism during this period was called *The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, in which each of the sons of Jacob gives a farewell speech before he dies. Each speech was supposedly preserved as an oral tradition, then later written down in the collection which constitutes the book. There are other similar writings such as *The Testament of Adam*, *The Testament of Abraham*, *The Testament of Solomon*, and *The Testament of Moses*, which is different than Moses' farewell discourse found in Deuteronomy.

The discourse of Moses recorded in Deuteronomy is, perhaps, the best known example of a farewell discourse. This discourse ends in a prayer, as does the farewell discourse of Jesus. In Deut 31:30 Moses concludes his words, then in 32:1, he turns from the people to the heavens and addresses

God, then in 33:1, Moses turns back to the people and blesses them (a speech which is also in the form of a prayer or a request of God). Jesus does much the same thing here in this farewell discourse material. He is speaking to the disciples up to the end of chapter 16; then, in 17:1, he lifts his eyes to heaven and begins to pray.

Monologue: Jesus Prays For Himself
(17:1-5)

There are three themes to develop here in these verses: (1) the hour has come (17:1), (2) his power/authority over all men (17:2), and (3) the theme of eternal life (17:2-3).

The Hour Has Come
(17:1)

Jesus begins his prayer in traditional form by addressing himself to God. He uses the familial term "Father," which in Aramaic was possibly "*Abba*," a term many have suggested should be translated as "Daddy." Very few 33 year-old men call their father daddy. The term essentially carries an endearing flavor to it that would be just as present in "father" and in any other similar term. In fact, just to address God as father was out of the ordinary and was an action which would have made many Jews uncomfortable. In reading through the collection of David's prayers found in Psalms, he never uses the term "Father" in addressing God. Jesus repeatedly addresses God as Father here in this prayer: 17:1, 5, 11, 20, 24, and 25.

"Father," Jesus cries out, "the hour has come." The word "hour" has a poetic sense here; the "time" has come for something expected to occur. This theme is introduced at John 2:4, appears again at 7:30, 8:20, 12:23, 13:1, and ends here at 17:1. Jesus is speaking of the conflict with the forces of evil he has been moving toward since his Messianic anointing at his baptism and Satan's original attempt to overcome him with temptation as he did with Eve and Adam. Each encounter with sin (e.g., the temptations of Luke 4), and each encounter with demonic beings (e.g., Mark 1:21-28; 3:22-30; 5:1-17) is a preliminary conflict leading to this final conflict with the dark powers of Satan (cf. 1 John 3:8; Gal 1:4; etc.).

His Power and Authority over All Men
(17:2)

We have here in the opening words of this prayer a confessional statement of Jesus as to whom he believed himself to be. "Glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you." This is followed with an accompanying claim of his authority as the Son, "In that you gave him authority (*exousia*) over all flesh," (17:2).

The Greek word translated in most English versions as "power" is not the Greek word for power. That word is "*dunamis*." The word found here is *exousia*, which means, "authority." This term is found also in Matt 28:18, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." This statement raises the question of the extent of his authority over the human race.

Are all men everywhere amenable to the authority of Christ, or are only those in a covenant relationship with him (his believers) subject to his authority. Is Jesus Lord absolute of heaven and earth, or is he only a king over those claiming to be his subjects). It cannot be seriously questioned that in his words of Matt 28:18 Jesus claimed universal authority over all men everywhere.

He is Lord Absolute and all men everywhere are amenable to him. The significance of this is that it is not the case that what Jesus says is wrong for all men is wrong only for those who believe in him. What Jesus condemns as wrong is wrong for all men alike, both believer and nonbeliever. This is not a position most of the world will acknowledge and it remains for those who refuse to acknowledge Jesus' authority over them to take it up with them when they see him.

The Theme of Eternal Life
(17:2-3)

The theme of "eternal life" is one of the major themes in the writings of John. The usual understanding of this concept is one of "quantity of life" rather than "quality of life." In John the concept involves both ideas. In Western thought the word "eternal" is most usually associated with duration of time. In the New Testament, however, the term carries the idea of "a higher kind of life" as well as life "into the ages." The reason for the notion

of a special "quality of life" as well as "quantity of life" as associated with the concept of eternal life in the NT is due to the union of the two terms "zoe" and "aionios." The term "aionios," in and of itself can only communicate the idea of duration or expanse of time; however, when associated with "zoe" it connects the idea of duration of time with the idea of *zoe*, from which the concept of quality of life derives. One often finds the Greek term *aionios* used with certain prepositions to convey the idea of eternal life; the most common expression is "*zoe eis ton aiona*," which translates literally as "life into the ages" (cf. John 4:14; 6:51, 58; 8:35, 51, 52; 11:26; 12:34; 13:8; and 14:16).

The theme of eternal life is found in the Gospel of John, beginning at 3:15-16, 4:36; 5:39; 6:54, 68; 10:28; 12:25; and ends here at 17:2-3. Also of significance is the "eternal life" theme in 1 John (cf. 1:2; 2:25; 3:15; 5:11, 13, 20). It is curious to note that 1 John 3:15; 5:11, 13, and 20 all speak of "having" eternal life as a present possession. Here John is communicating the idea of a quality of life that is what it is because of its intrinsic connection with God. The animated being in which soul (*nephesh* / *pseuche*) is the sum of existence is a life that will surely die. The life that is characterized and driven by the spirit, in addition to the breath of life (*nephesh* / *pseuche*), is life that goes on into eternity in that it is the spirit that returns to God at death when the flesh returns to the earth and the breath ceases to be.

This is the meaning of life as used by John in the expression "eternal life." It is always written "*zoe aionios*" never "*pseuche aionios*" or "*bios aionios*;" and this is the case here in John 17:2. The key to receiving this "eternal life," is believing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God as is expressed here in our John 17 text (cf., John 3:16; 5:39; 6:68-69; 17:2-3; 1 John 2:22-25; 5:11, 20).

Monologue: Jesus Prays for His Disciples (17:6-19)

One theme of major significance is found here in these verses. It is the theme of "the name," which is introduced by Jesus first in 5:43, then 10:25, and again in 12:28. Here in the discourse material Jesus mentions it again in 14:13-14, 26; 15:16, 21, 23, 24, and 26. Then here in the third discourse he states that he has revealed the Father ("the name") to these disciples (17:6, 11, 12; and also 17:26); then in verse 6 he says, "I have manifested your

name to those whom you gave me out of the world.” Again in verse 11 he says, “Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name – the name you gave me,” (17:11). Then in verse 12 we read, “While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me,” (17:12). His prayer concludes with the words,

Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them (17:25-26).

In at least 125 references in the NT, major significance is attached to the name of God or the name of Jesus, more so in the Hebrew Scriptures with the name of God. It is as though knowing the name, or calling upon that name, had special power associated with it, and Jesus wanted these men to understand that. He repeatedly says to them that he had revealed “the name” to them (17:6), he prayed that they be kept safe in “the name” (17:11-12), and concludes the prayer saying that he had made known “the name” of God to those God had given him (17:26). What is the significance of this repeated emphasis on “the name” of God?

Throughout the four Gospels, we see reference to wonders being worked “in the name” of God/Christ (Matt 7:22; Mark 9:38-39; Acts 3:6, 16). Salvation is directly connected to “the name” of God/Jesus/Christ (John 1:12; 2:23; 3:18; 20:31; Acts 2:21, 38; 4:12; 8:12, 16; 22:16; Rom 10:13; 1 John 3:23; 5:13). They would gain special access to God if they lifted their petition “in his name” (John 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23-26). Names play a role of major significance in John's book of Revelation: 2:13, 17; 3:1, 8, 12; 14:1; 19:12-13, 16; 22:4). Evil is often associated with “a name” (cf. Rev 6:8; 9:11; 13:1, 17; 14:11; 15:2; 17:5).

This same phenomenon is found in the Hebrew Scriptures. In Psalms 22:22 we read, “I will declare your name unto my brethren: In the midst of the assembly will I praise you,” (see also Heb 2:12). In Psalms 9:10, we read, “And they that know thy name will put their trust in you.” Isaiah speaks of the name of God in a similar manner. In the midst of their affliction God says to his people, “My people shall know my name: therefore they shall know in that day that I am he that speaks; behold it is I” (Isaiah 52:6; cf. also Ezek 39:7).

The name of God was written in the Hebrew Scriptures in consonants only - “*YHWH*” and is traceable back to Exodus 3:13ff, where God told Moses that this was his name. It is the verb “to be,” used as a sustentative with the multipliable meanings of, "I am," or "I will be," or “I cause to be.” In the Greek Septuagint translation of this verse the Hebrew expression is translated in Greek as “*ego eimi*” (I, I am), the same expression used in all the "I am" sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of John (cf. 4:26; 6:20; 8:24, 58).

What does all this mean? To fully appreciate what is going on here, one must understand that in ancient cultures one's name possessed special meaning and the name was representative of the person himself. In fact, the most prevalent concept of living beyond death to the Hebrews was having one's name live on after his death. This is why the birth of a son was so important. A man lived on through his good works and through his son who carries on his name; e.g., Simon bar Jonah is Simon the son of Jonah.

It was also believed in the first century Mediterranean world that certain words or expressions, especially names, carried magical power. With gods and goddesses, their names were believed to carry their presence and their power. Their names were, in essence, an extension of themselves. The written name of a deity was the same as an icon of that deity - it was believed to be the essence of the deity. To bow before "the name" and offer worship to it was the same as worshipping the deity him/herself. To call upon the name of a deity was to invoke his/her presence, for good or for evil. The taboo against uttering a god's name in vain was rooted in the belief that one may call up the deity without meaning to, which could result in an outpouring of his wrath. In certain mystery cults only the members knew the name of the deity they worshipped; this was part of “the mystery.” To know the mysterious/esoteric name of the deity was to have access to special magical powers.

Israel knew the name (*HaShem*) of the most powerful deity of Canaan, and that knowledge gave them an advantage over all the other tribes (peoples) of that world. Israel's whole history must be interpreted in view of the fact that God had placed “his name” in their midst, and because of that they were a special and favored people. Although God dwelt above the heavens and the earth, he had chosen a place on earth and had caused his name to dwell there (Deut 12:10-11; 2 Sam 7:13; 1 Kings 3:2; 9:3, 7). All the nations who knew of Israel feared the name of Israel's God (Psalms 102:15; Isaiah 59:19).

This is discussed by Josephus in *Wars of the Jews* 5:438. He writes that in times of crisis the Jews would "invoke the terrible name of God". It was believed that the source of the power of the prophets of ancient Israel was their knowledge of God's name, which they called upon to invoke his presence. From such references as Psalms 20:1; 54:1; Proverbs 18:10; and Jer 10:6, it appears that God's name was believed to possess intrinsic power capable of protecting those who call upon "the name." The expression "to call upon the name of the Lord" was a common expression for prayer - to invoke the presence of God in order to have an audience with him (cf., Gen 4:26; 12:8; 13:4; 26:25; 1 Sam 12:17; 1 Kings 18:24; Psalms 99:6; 105:1; 116:13, 17; Isaiah 58:8-9; Joel 2:32; Acts 2:21; 22:16; Rom 10:12-14). For further information on this concept see: James Frazer, *The New Golden Bough*, edited by Theodor H. Gaster, pp. 176, 271-72; and "Onoma," in *The Theological Dictionary of the NT*, 5:242-81; and Raymond Brown, *John*, Anchor Bible Commentary, 2:754-56.

Now, how does all this inform our thinking concerning Jesus' words to his disciples here in John 13-17, as well as the other Gospels? It is interesting to note that in four different texts John uses the expression "believing in the name," or more literally from the Greek, "believing into the name;" see John 1:12; 2:23; 3:18; 1 John 5:13. Also of significance here is Matt 28:19; Acts 2:38; 8:16; 19:5; and 1 Cor 1:13 and 15, where the same Greek expression is found.

**Monologue: Jesus Prays for All Those
Who Believe in Him
(17:20-26)**

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

In 17:20, Jesus moves to those who believe in him through the word of these disciples. "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message." These words clearly anticipate the development of a community of believers. A major concern Jesus expresses here is, "that they all be one," (v 21). What is implied by this expression?

This desire has never been fully realized by the followers of Christ. It must be acknowledged that there is going to be diversity within any group of people or any community of believers. How far should the diversity be allowed to go? This has been a controversial issue throughout the history of Christianity and, perhaps, rages on today more than any other time. How do we make decisions on controversial issues? If the difference makes no difference, then the difference doesn't matter. There are differences of belief, however, that clearly make it impossible to have oneness within the community of faith. There are “matters of faith” which are based on the words of Scriptures, this is consistent with Jesus’ words here in 17:6-8; and there are numerous matters for which there are no words of Scriptures (i.e., the Scriptures are silent); these are “matters of choice.

John speaks more to this issue than any other NT writer. In fact, this Gospel was written, in all probability, to address a major controversy within early Christianity. Most scholars agree that it was a Christological controversy (John 20:30-31). How does one interpret this man from Galilee? Who was he? From what John presents in this Gospel, it appears that one must take seriously the Christological claims of Jesus of Nazareth in order to be considered a true disciple of Christ.

“For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them,” Jesus says in verse 6, “they knew with certainty that I came from you and they believed that you sent me.” Then in verse 7-8 he continues, “Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me.” This is a clear affirmation that what made these eleven men his disciples was their belief in him and his words: that everything he taught them was from God and this was because he himself was sent from God.

Conclusion

One of the major themes of this Gospel is “belief versus disbelief.” From 1 John we know that a showdown over Christology had occurred within the community of believers to whom John was writing (cf. 1 John 2:4-6, 18-19, 22-23; 3:7-10; 4:1-3, 13-16). Some who had been a part of their number (i.e., their community of faith) had denied that Jesus was who he claimed himself to be; i.e., that he was God who was here with us as one

of us. Various Gnostic groups wanted the world to see Jesus as a man who was indwelt by deity “in some sense” but he was not God in the flesh, a view very similar to the positions of the liberal academics of the 19th through the 21st centuries in this country and in Europe.

To this apostle of Christ this diversity of belief could not be tolerated (cf. 1 John 2:18-23). The list of items of faith in Eph 4:4-6 presents us with beliefs which another apostle of Christ considered to be essential to unity or oneness. From what we learn from historical documentation of the earliest controversies of the church, various Judaic and Gnostic movements within the church contested one or more of these essentials to the faith.

In the thinking of this apostle there were beliefs essential to being a Christian or disciple of Christ. One may not simply believe anything s/he pleases. The most essential belief to one’s claims to being a Christian, however, is what s/he believes christologically; i.e., what we believe about who this person Jesus of Nazareth really was. In fact, this is precisely where Jesus centers the discussion of unity here in John 17:20-24. “I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one,” Jesus prays in verse 20;” then in verse 23 he adds, “May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me.”

Sad to say, Jesus’ prayer was not answered in the affirmative and the reason why is not that it wasn’t God’s will that Christians be one in all matters of faith. The reason why this prayer has not been fulfilled is that man himself, in the exercise of his will, does not want the unity for which Jesus prayed. His prayer was that believers be united in belief in that which came from him. However, those who have assumed the role of authorities in matters of Christian faith have advanced the view that believers may be united in whatever matters they choose to believe, and this was not the prayer of Jesus. In another prayer of Jesus he prayed to the Father, “Not my will but your will be done,” (Luke 22:39-42). This is another of the examples of Jesus that many of his professed followers and spokesmen have not been willing to follow.

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