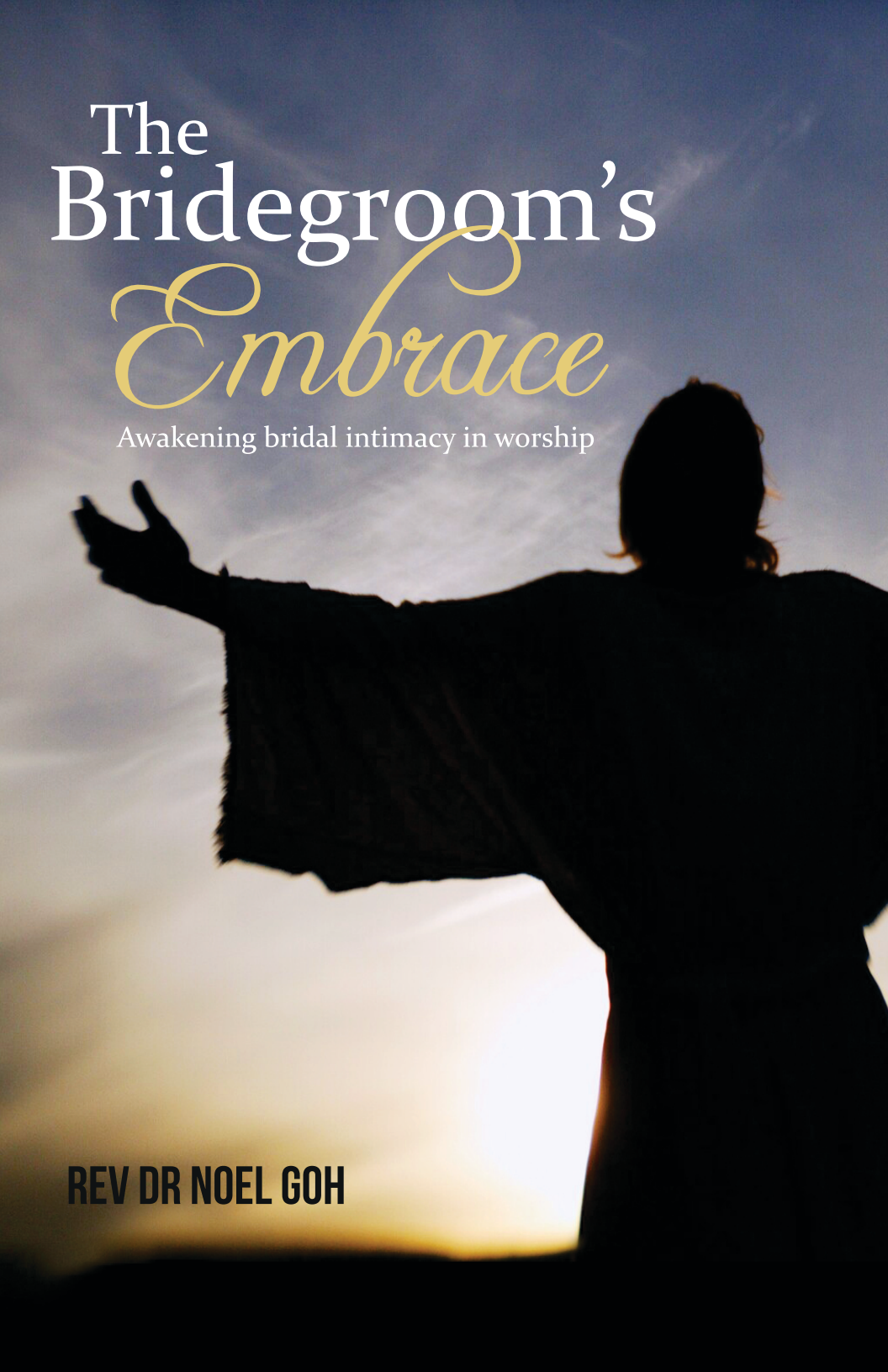

The
Bridegroom's
Embrace
Awakening bridal intimacy in worship
REV DR NOEL GOH

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Awakening Bridal Intimacy in Worship

Rev Dr Noel Goh

Preface

This publication is an expansion of an extract from a particular chapter in my Doctoral thesis at Robert E. Webber Institute of Worship Studies in Florida, USA.

My interest in awakening bridal intimacy in worship began first as a volunteer worship leader in church. It grew in me as a church pastor and training supervisor of pastors in liturgical leadership. But it was on hearing a worship song by Dennis Jernigan "Come as a Bridegroom for your Bride" in 1998 that awoke within me a longing of intimacy for the Bridegroom's embrace.



Acknowledgment

There are many people to be thanked for this work. Not least the people involved in my Doctoral thesis, but especially who helped with the rewrite and publishing this for the general public.

To name but a few, the following must be mentioned: Marcus Stephen, Ng Moh Ying, Ng Kwee Choo, Pauline Chan, John B. Samuel, Wilfred Yeo, Shirah Seah, Matthew and Edna Goh.

Last but not least, the 4G Team of Journey to Holiness, and especially my wife Stella who is constantly by my side in this team. Both the team and my wife are precious gifts from God for my life's calling and to whom I dedicate this to God’s glory.



EMBRACING THE BRIDEGROOM'S RETURN

Abstract

Despite the loss of intimacy through disobedience and sin, God's desire for intimacy with people endures. But the people's awareness of this desire is less enduring, especially in realizing the Bridegroom's longing for us, His Bride. Hence, an awakening of bridal intimacy in worship to embrace the bridegroom's return.

Introduction

"How aware are you of Jesus' desire for intimacy with you?" This question is a deeper way of asking a more familiar version, "Do you know how much God loves you?" At the heart of both questions is God's desire to have an intimate relationship with us. We do not have to earn it or prove that we are worthy of His love and acceptance.

However, the focus on relational intimacy seeks to re-envision the word "love" and unpack its awakening among the followers of our Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, it is a call for greater awareness of Jesus' longing for us as a bridegroom longs for his bride.

Such an awakening involves:

1. first, embracing His sacrificial love on the cross for us
2. second, growing in the intimacy of this embrace in the beauty of holiness
3. which then flows into an intimacy of worship that will reach history's climactic end at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.

Therefore, the goal of INTIMACY IN WORSHIP is an awakening towards union and communion in THE BRIDEGROOM'S EMBRACE.

WORSHIP is therefore basic since we were all

1. CREATED FOR WORSHIP,
2. REDEEMED FOR WORSHIP and ultimately
3. DESTINED FOR WORSHIP.

Realizing our destiny for worship will awaken and revive BRIDAL INTIMACY and position us for EMBRACING THE BRIDEGROOM'S RETURN.

After all, nothing is more important than worship both as a way of life and as the ultimate priority in response to what God has done. WORSHIP is hence the highest form of intimacy humanity can experience with a holy God.

This booklet, therefore, attempts to deepen a greater consciousness of God's desire for intimacy and

thereby awaken within us as the Bride of Christ for greater readiness and longing for Christ's return.

Can this be done? Yes. With the Holy Spirit's help, you can deepen a sense of consciousness of God's desire to have intimacy with us.

Intimacy Defined

First, a working understanding of the term intimacy.

1. Intimacy generally refers to feelings of close interpersonal relationships.
2. These feelings are developed through the sharing of knowledge and experiences in confidence. But the more open and honest this sharing and communication, the deeper the feelings of intimacy.
3. The result is a dynamic relationship, exclusive in its sense of bonding and belonging. This sense of belonging reaches its ideal in a union and communion akin to the marriage union of two becoming one. This union is arguably the most exclusive of all relationships on earth.

Likewise, intimacy with God requires such closeness of relationship, equally personal and exclusive. The difference lies in that the relationship is between the finite and the Infinite, the created with the Creator. Such a relationship satisfies the longing of intimacy the Infinite God ardently desires for us.

In the chapters that follow, I shall explore the biblical and theological foundations of this truth that God desires intimacy with us. From the literature search for my doctoral thesis, I discovered that more had been written on how we can be intimate with God rather than the other way around.

Hence, with the Holy Spirit's help, going back to the foundational texts of our faith has given me fresh understanding enriched by the insights from theological reflections of others.

Biblical Foundations

In the Bible, God's desire for intimacy with us can be seen going back to the time of creation. He created us in His image for the expressed purpose of enjoying an intimate relationship with us. But when Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden, they were expelled from His presence. Nevertheless, throughout the Bible, we can read of God's relentless pursuit of intimacy with us.

This pursuit of God is evident from the following three biblical passages, which I will examine in their respective context and chapter content:

1. Genesis 17, concerning God's confirmation of a covenant relationship with Abraham,

2. Exodus 25, concerning the Tabernacle as a provision and pattern for access into God's presence, and

3. John 17, concerning Jesus' high priestly prayer for His disciples.

Theological Foundations

Three theological themes will further strengthen the foundation of how God desires intimacy with us:

1. Forgiveness
2. Holiness and
3. Worship.

Collectively, these three themes offer an understanding of progressive development in the intimacy that God desires,

1. commencing with forgiveness,
2. continuing in holiness, and
3. culminating in worship.

This section will, however, be developed in a separate sequel to this publication.

The Conclusion

From the three biblical narratives examined, first in the covenant with Abraham, then in the provision of the Tabernacle, and finally in Jesus' prayer for His disciples, I hope to show that God's desire for intimacy

with us is central to His very mission in the ultimate redemption of His creation.

This conclusion leads to the inevitable question: “What is your response to this understanding?”

Many responses can be explored.

But may I invite you to consider a four-part course entitled Journey to Holiness to personally encounter for yourselves a fresh embrace of the bridal intimacy in worship for greater anticipation of our Bridegroom's return.

For those who are interested, you can registerfor this course on the website https://journey2holiness.org/contact-us. We would like to hear from you.

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

I find evidence of God's relentless pursuit of intimacy with us pervasive in the Bible. Still, these three passages stand out to me for their respective emphases, two from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament.

1. Genesis 17, concerning God's confirmation of a covenant relationship with Abraham,
2. Exodus 25, concerning the Tabernacle as a provision and pattern for access into God's presence, and
3. John 17, concerning Jesus' high priestly prayer for His disciples.

1. Genesis 17

The Context of Genesis 17

God's desire for intimacy with us can be traced back to the beginning. As the book of beginnings, Genesis introduces two foundational themes of the Bible: creation and redemption. At the time of creation, Genesis 1:26a records God saying, "Let us make human beings in our image" (NLT), and intimacy was enjoyed

unhindered. But because of their disobedience in Genesis 3, Adam and Eve became self-conscious of their guilt and shame. They began to shun intimacy and hide from the presence of God. The result was their expulsion from His presence and access to the Tree of Life.

Not with standing this setback, God continued to pursue His desire for intimacy with us. He called Abraham into a covenant relationship with Himself, first introduced in Genesis 12. From Abraham's line would then come God's redemption plan to recover this intimacy when He Himself would take on human form. Indeed, this redemption plan is arguably more glorious than the work of creation. At creation, God merely spoke a word, and worlds were formed, while redemption cost Him much more. But more of that in the theological foundations.

The Chapter of Genesis 17

I have therefore selected Genesis 17 because in God's confirmation and renewal of His covenant with Abraham undergirded by the following seven characteristics, His desire for intimacy with us is unmistakable in this chapter:[1]

[1] Terence E. Fretheim, *Abraham: Trials of Family and Faith. Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), 40, refers to this covenant in Genesis 17 as "the newly intensified relationship" between God and Abraham, formalizing "an already existing promise of an ongoing and intimate relationship" first begun in Genesis 12 and 15.

First, the covenant renewal came with a change of name in Genesis 17:5 from Abram, meaning *exalted father* to Abraham, meaning *father of a multitude*. The significance of this expanded meaning confirmed the earlier promises God gave to Abraham that his descendants would be countless "as the dust of the earth" in Genesis 13:16 and "as the stars in the sky" in Genesis 15:5.

Second, the covenant took on a timeless dimension that extends from generation to generation in verse 7. In fact, God calls it "the everlasting covenant" and repeats it three times in this chapter alone: here in verse 7 and also in verse 13, concerning circumcision and again in verse 19 regarding his son's name, Isaac.

The third characteristic of this covenant renewal is how God identified Himself in verse 7 as "your God and the God of your descendants." His identity is henceforth associated with Abraham.

The fourth is the land as forever their very physical possession in verse 8. Currently, the title deed to this real estate is hotly disputed in the Middle East.

The fifth is introduced in verse 10 as the circumcision of every male on the eighth day after their birth. Circumcision is to be a covenant sign

of a binding practice to bear this physical mark on the bodies of all males, including those of servants purchased (Genesis 17:11–14).

The sixth characteristic of this covenant renewal is in another change of name, this time, Abraham's wife's name, from Sarai to Sarah in verse 15.

The seventh was the promise of a son when Sarah was ninety years old (verses 16, 17). On hearing this, Abraham made a bid for Ishmael, his existing thirteen-year-old son from Hagar, Sarah's maid (Genesis 16). But God had already promised the everlasting covenant would only be through His gift of a son from Sarah's womb. The timing of his birth within a year's time and his name were also indicated.

These characteristics confirm that God's covenant relationship with Abraham in His desire for intimacy is undergirded with a sense of permanence. The change of names and the marking of bodies in perpetuity further reflect the intensification of God's desire for intimacy. He even took on a turn in His own name, the God of Abraham, an identity that bears the exclusive bond and belonging that is characteristic of intimacy, as highlighted earlier. This covenant's exclusiveness also extends to Isaac and his descendants, as an "everlasting covenant" from one generation to another in perpetuity.

The Conclusion for Genesis 17

The covenant renewal in Genesis 17 is, therefore, one of the strongest, if not the strongest, initial evidence of God's desire for intimacy. This desire is underscored by an unmistakable sense of belonging in an embrace.

2. Exodus 25

The Context of Exodus 25

Another strong early evidence of God's desire for intimacy can be seen in the book of Exodus following on from the book of Genesis.

Where Genesis ended with the flight of Jacob's family to Egypt, Exodus begins with their exit from Egypt, at least in the first fifteen chapters. Furthermore, where the covenant that began in Genesis with one man – that of Abraham as "a friend of God"[2] is now enlarged in Exodus to newly constitute the nation of Israel as God's "own special treasure."[3]

The first thing to note is the word **exodus**. It is made up of two Greek words, *ex* for **exit** and *hodus* for **the way**. Hence, the word **exodus** captures the way out of 430 years of slavery in Egypt. But is there more to it than

[2] Isaiah 41:8, 2Chronicles 20:7, James 2:23.
[3] Deuteronomy 7:6, 14:2, 26:18, Psalm 135:4, Malachi 3:17.

just freedom and liberation from oppression? The answer lies with the second word to note, **covenant.** We have already encountered this word in Abraham. According to Kelly, the covenant, in general, was "designed primarily for the purpose of overcoming the distance between Yahweh and His people, to heal the breach created by their sin, and to bring them into the circle of His power and presence."[4]

And since God had not overlooked and forgotten this covenant nor had His desire for intimacy waned as it may appear to be during these 430 years, this exit from Egypt was timely. It was time for God to fulfill the promise of the "everlasting covenant" He had with Abraham.

Furthermore, Abraham's family had now multiplied greatly in numbers, albeit under Egyptian subjugation. Therefore, the first order of things is to free them so that they could determine their future in the intimacy of the covenant, into which He had called them. It was, thus, a kairos opportunity for God to raise their covenant to a higher and more intimate level. It was also time to define their identity and destiny as a people of the covenant.

From this perspective, the crucial reason for their exodus was more than merely an exit from Egypt. It was purposefully to bring their covenant to greater

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[4] Page H. Kelly, "Israel's Tabernacling God" (*Review & Expositor*, 76 No.4, Fall 1970, p 485–494), 486.

fulfillment of the desired intimacy. The three main divisions of the outline in the book bear this out:

Chapters 1–14 : The Ten Plagues were to liberate for worship;

Chapters 15–24 : The Ten Commandments were to legislate a holy nation for worship

Chapters 25–40 : The Ten Parts of the Tabernacle were to locate an address on earth for worship.

Notice how these three divisions of the book converge onto the focus of one central overarching theme of the whole book – worship. The theme of exit or liberation is not enough to integrate with the last two sections of the book. Instead, it is the inclusion of this third section on the Tabernacle that pulls together the central focus of the whole book, namely worship.[5]

Hence, the central theme of the book of Exodus cannot be just to exit but rather, exit to exalt! Furthermore, this theme of 'exit to exalt' is true not only for the book of Exodus but equally valid for every Christian "called out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9).

[5] No wonder this third section has suffered much omission in popular interest and has even been dismissed as relevant only to Jewish history and culture. Such neglect that de-links our roots was promoted by mistakenly regarding the Old Testament as superseded and replaced by the New Testament

Therefore, the purpose behind the Ten Plagues, calling Pharaoh to "Let my people go" was to liberate them into the intimacy of grateful worship in God's covenantal embrace. Indeed, "Let the redeemed of the Lord say so whom He has redeemed from the hands of your enemies" (Psalm 107:2).

On arriving at Mt. Sinai, God then revealed His holy standards for His liberated people at both the personal, private level as well as the public, communal life. They were to govern themselves in a way that befits who God is in His call to them to be holy as He is holy (Leviticus 11:44). Indeed, the purpose of the Ten Commandments was to legislate and constitute a holy nation of priests to reveal the holiness of His covenantal intimacy in worship.

Additionally, at Mt. Sinai, God further revealed His rationale and exacting details for the construction of the Tabernacle. Fretheim points out that since only God could have provided such details appropriate for worship, the Tabernacle is entirely a divine initiative and represents His commitment to intimacy.[6]

With this appreciation of this context, Exodus chapter 25 is, therefore, appropriate to launch this third

[6] Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1991), 265, 276.

section on the Tabernacle and unfold God's provision for intimacy in His Holy Presence.

The Chapter of Exodus 25

Exodus 25 begins with God telling Moses to invite the people to contribute various items as listed. They were the building materials required for constructing the physical sanctuary for God. The purpose of this structure follows in verses 8 and 9, revealing what is considered to be the most explicit expression of God's desire for intimacy. It was issued as a command to Moses, "Have the people of Israel build me a holy sanctuary so I can live among them. You must build this Tabernacle and its furnishings exactly according to the pattern I will show you" (NLT).

As Cohen puts it, this was so that God might "descend from [his] transcendent obscurity and remoteness in the outer reaches of heaven, and become transmuted almost into a next-door neighbor."[7] Cohen further calls this "God's readiness to dwell among men and have a home next door, the logical climactic stage of God's decision to bridge the gap between God and man." Additionally, he sees in this decision a form of therapy to calm His people's irrational fears of deity and bridge His majestic remoteness. They could hereafter,

[7] Jeffrey M. Cohen, "The Dilemma of the Sanctuary" (*Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 25 No.3, Jul–Sep 1997, p 185–187), 185.

experience a God who would "compromise His honor for the sake of bringing Israel into a healthier and warmer relationship with him."[8] Therefore, "the peculiar thing vouchsafed to the covenant people was the real indwelling and gracious presence of Yahweh in their midst."[9] Setting up a sanctuary in the Tabernacle's physical structure was thus the right and fitting thing to do to enhance intimacy.

Subsequent to this purpose disclosed in verses 8 and 9, God went on to reveal His exacting and significant construction plans. He begins first with the Ark in the Holy of Holies in verses 10–22 and then the Table of Shewbread in verses 23–30. The chapter ends with the Golden Lampstand in verses 31–40. Since both the Table and the Lampstand are located in the Holy Place, I shall focus more on the details of the Ark in the Holy of Holies.

But Klein argues that "it is not the details of the tabernacle account that is significant" but "His divine intention to be present with and for the believing community in a tangible way."[10] Hamilton concurs. "What makes this place of worship so compelling is the presence of God in their midst."[11] He sees a two-fold movement in the overall

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[8] Cohen, 186, 187.

[9] Kelly, 487.

[10] Ralph W. Klein, "Back to the Future: The Tabernacle in the Book of Exodus" (*Interpretation,* 50 No. 3 Jul 1996, p 2642–76), 275.

[11] Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 448.

Exodus story: God moving “from deliverance to dwelling, from saving to staying.” This two-fold movement can also be seen in God moving His people. First, from a fixed location on a mountain to a portable tent; second, from an occasional appearance to an ongoing continuous presence, especially during their journey through the wilderness[12] and third, from a remote distance “to having a place where [He] could dwell among them and meet them.”[13] Hamilton, therefore, concludes that this is “now the closest one gets to 'seeing' God.”[14]

There are three parts to the Tabernacle structure. They represent God's provision of a progression from the Outer Court through the Holy Place to ultimately reach the Holy of Holies. To reach the Holy of Holies is the ultimate goal because God had declared in Exodus 25:22, “I will meet with you there and talk to you from above the atonement cover between the gold cherubim that hover over the Ark of the Covenant. From there, I will give you my commands for the people of Israel” (NLT). This is, therefore, symbolic of God's desire to keep a people in covenant relationship near to Himself, despite their sinfulness.

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[12] Hamilton, 264.

[13] Hamilton, xxvi.

[14] Hamilton, 447.

The three items that God had chosen to place in the Ark,[15] in His presence, reinforce His gracious intent. They were explicitly mentioned in Hebrews 9:4 and are symbolic of the shortcomings of the people. From this perspective, they are as memorials of His people's failures, hardly deserving of a place in the holiest part of the Tabernacle. But God keeps them in His presence, in the Ark covered by a lid, called the Mercy Seat. This has great significance.

His mercy and compassion cover and overlook all our failings. This is to say how much He longs for us to come before Him and fulfill His desire for intimacy with us. This longing is somewhat similar to the father of the prodigal son. He waits to welcome, receive, and embrace his return, notwithstanding his failings. This theme of forgiveness will be expanded further in theological reflections.

Prophet Jeremiah could have been thinking of the Mercy Seat when he declared in Lamentations 3:22, "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed because His compassions fail not" (KJV). Similarly, with Apostle Paul, when he wrote in Romans 12:1, "I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of

[15] Hebrews 9:4 lists the contents in the Ark. 1. the golden urn containing manna – a memorial of God's provision, albeit because the people were ungrateful and grumbling. 2. The budding of Aaron's rod was to settle the rebellion started by Korah. 3. the stone tablets of the covenant, albeit the second edition after the original was destroyed because of idolatry in Israel's worship of the golden calf.

God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (ESV).

The Conclusion for Exodus 25

The whole system of the Tabernacle amid Israel reflects how fully God desires to draw near and dwell in every spiritual aspect of the lives of His covenant people. Exodus 25 reveals God's holy desire for intimacy embodied at the Mercy Seat, in the holiest part of the Tabernacle yet fully accessible eventually through Jesus' death on the Cross.

3. John 17

The Context of John 17

Sandwiched between our Lord's Last Supper with His disciples in John 13, and the Passion story of His death in John 18, we find, in John 17, the longest prayer of our Lord in the New Testament. Unique only to the Gospel of John, Archbishop William Temple calls it "the most sacred passage in the four gospels."[16] Borchert claims that few passages of Scripture come close to revealing the intimacy Jesus enjoyed with His Father as these magnificent twenty-six verses.[17]

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[16] William Temple, *Readings in St. John's Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 293.

[17] Gerald L. Borchert, John 12–21. *An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture, New American Commentary 25B* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2002), 188.

Hence, I shall conclude our biblical foundations for this central truth that God desires intimacy with a New Testament passage in this third and final passage from John chapter 17.

The Chapter of John 17

John 17 has often been referred to as the high priestly prayer of Jesus, although some scholars find that controversial.[18] Nevertheless, most commentators agree that the prayer is structured along three petitions made with the consciousness that His mission on earth was coming to an end. The first petition was for Himself, while the second and third were intercessions for His disciples, both present and future, as they continued with His mission in His absence. These three petitions reveal an undergirding intimacy Jesus had with His Father as the correct focus for prayer.

The First Petition

In John 17:1–5 (NIV), the first of the three petitions, Jesus' request to His Father revealed two things:

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[18] Harold W. Attridge, "How Priestly is the 'High Priestly Prayer' of John 17" (*The Catholic Biblical Quarterly,* 75 No. 1 Jan 2013, p 1–14). He points out that its priestly nature is not without controversy though He concedes that the "priestly" elements do exist. But he cautions against the inappropriate theological use of priestly motifs since they were designed not as a foundation for later clerical theology. 14.

J. Gerald Janzen, "The Scope of Jesus' High Priestly Prayer in John 17," (*Encounter*, 67 No. 1, Winter 2006, p 1–26), also support its priestly character from the function of the priestly garment and analogous of the high priest's role in Exodus 28. 1, 5.

First, the purpose behind His request, "Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you." (verse 1b) and again, "glorify me in your presence" (verse 5a).

Second, His intimacy with His Father was pre-existent "the glory I had with you before the world began" (verse 5b).

The reason for requesting this glory was to reflect it back to the Father as Stevick points out, the glory of the Father is the final reality.[19] This is the correct focus for prayer in spite of the context that "the hour has come" (John 17:1). This signifies Jesus' imminent completion of His mission on earth with His death on the Cross.

Having been sent by the Father on this mission, Jesus was careful that this glory was not for Himself as affirmed earlier in John 8:50a but solely for the sake of His Father. The success and glory of His sacrifice should be attributed back to the originator of this mission.

Stevick goes on to stress. "The glory-giving between the Father and the Son is mutual; each gives and each receives. The act which most fully reveals the glory of one reveals the glory of both."[20] Such is the intimacy that had pre-existed between them as Father and Son.

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[19] Daniel B. Stevick, *Jesus and His Own: A Commentary on John 13–17* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 325.

[20] Stevick, 325

Verse 2 recognizes the glory that the Son had was received from the Father. This meant the authority to offer eternal life to all who would believe Him and His mission comes from the Father. Verse 3 confirms this understanding: "Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." Jesus understood the purpose of His mission is to be life-giving. It is to pave the way for people to know and experience who God is as the only source and giver of life.

Earlier on that same evening, Jesus had asserted in John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." And even earlier, other similar claims were made: "I have come that you may have life and have life abundantly" in John 10:10 and "I am the resurrection and the life" in John 11:25. They show how clearly Jesus understood His mission to be life-giving, to call people back to the source of life, back to the intimacy that His Father had created at its very beginning.

Indeed, the glory of His Father as the mission sender is His love in offering eternal life through what would soon be secured on the Cross. It should be no surprise that such an offer of life in love is no less than an offer of intimacy God has desired. And Jesus is well qualified to make this offer because of the oneness in intimacy He shares with His Father, even before creation.

Thus, His appraisal of His mission in John 17:4, "I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do." And in verse 5, He repeats His request, "Now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began."

Such glory is not new. It is not freshly minted. It is a condition that has always belonged to Him from the beginning of time. By finishing the work assigned Him through His sacrifice for sin, Jesus is now reclaiming that prior glory, shared in the intimacy that befits their relationship as Father and Son.

The Second Petition

In John 17:6–19, the second petition, Jesus prays "not for the world, but for those you have given me" in verse 9. Milne sees Jesus making four requests here for His disciples:[21]

> First, that they are to be protected: "protect them by the power of your name" (verse 11b) and "protect them from the evil one" (verse 15b).
>
> Second, they are to be united: "that they may be one as we are one" (verse 11c).
>
> Third, they are to be delighted: "that they may have the full measure of my joy within them" (verse 13b), and

[21] Bruce Milne, *The Message of John: Here is Your King! Bible Speaks Today* (London: IVP, 1993), 244–246.

Fourth, that they are to be dedicated: "Sanctify them by the truth;" (verse 17a) and "that they too may be truly sanctified" (verse 19b).

In praying for their safety in a hostile world, Jesus did not request their removal from the world. That would mean a loss of their witness in the world. Instead, He prayed they would not only be protected but find joy and remain true and holy even in the midst of onslaughts from the evil one and rejection from the world.

But His heart for His disciples is in verse 11c, "that they may be one as we are one." This request is to ensure that the same unity and alignment may similarly empower them in their mission as it had in His own experience. Therefore, His disciples needed to get to know who God is – as their caring Father offering forgiveness, loving-kindness, and comfort as a loving father would.

Hence, Borchert explains the background. Jesus wanted to reintroduce to his disciples a direct encounter with God as Father instead of some mysterious unapproachable God.[22] The Jewish world that Jesus had entered had developed by then a remote view of God. The people had ceased to use the holy name of God for fear of taking His name in vain. Into

[22] Borchert, 210.

this context of speaking of God using surrogate titles, Jesus came and called God His Father. But what was even more astounding was when He taught His disciples to pray "Our Father." For the Jews of those days, such a personal approach to God degrades God and is tantamount to blasphemy.[23]

Therefore, in His prayer, he needed to model for His disciples that God was not some abstract force in the universe but a personal caring father. In this way, their mission can similarly succeed and glorify such a God. Intimacy with God, like a branch abiding in the vine, is key to the success of their whole operation.

The Third Petition

In the final petition found in John 17:20–26, Jesus prayed "also for those who will believe in me through their message" in verse 20b. Again, three petitions for His future disciples can be seen:

> First, "that all of them may be one" (verse 21a),
>
> Second, "that the world may believe" (verse 21b), and
>
> Third, "those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me" (verse 24).

The importance of this prayer for unity is grounded in the mutual indwelling between the Father and the Son.

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[23] Borchert, 187.

It is not unity for unity's sake nor a d structural unity of an organization. Rather, it is a relational unity as a witness to the world so that the divided and hostile world might come to believe in Jesus when they see such relational unity amongst His believers. And the glory that Jesus had given to His disciples in verse 22 is again the glory of the unity through the intimacy that He had with His Father. In this way, His disciples could then experience the same power of this unity through intimacy for themselves to ensure the continuity of the mission they were entrusted with.

“I in them and you in me” in verse 23, succinctly captures this concept of unity through the intimacy of Christ's indwelling in believers and that of the Father's indwelling in Christ. To the extent that they are able to embody such harmonization of unity and intimacy before a watching world, it will exemplify and personify the message of their mission. Clearly, this unity is relational and rooted in a relational intimacy for the world to see and know how great God's love is for them. Janzen understands this love to be centrifugal. By centrifugal, he means moving “outward into the world seeking the oneness of the world in God and God's Christ” rather than a centripetal that “withdraws into a 'holy huddle'”[24] of an inward unity and intimacy.

[24] Janzen, 26.

This outward focus of unity in the body of Christ begins by first understanding the unity between the Son and the Father, defined by an intimacy of love. When this understanding is embodied amongst believers, the world will then see this central truth that God desires in love, this intimacy for all.

Jesus then concluded His prayer with the petition that all believers may ultimately realize their great hope to be with him in his glory. Until then, they may live in the spirit of love and unity, intimacy and harmony with each other.

The *Pater* Word

Jesus used an intimate word *Pater* (Greek for 'father') to address His Father. Therefore, it is significant to conclude by tracing the six separate instances of this word used in John 17.

The first two instances are in verses 1 and 5 as a pair. They refer to the glory that Jesus shared with His Father, which has been discussed above.

The next two occurrences as a pair are found in verses 11 and 21. Jesus used it as an example in praying for His disciples' unity, as also elaborated above.

The last two references in John 17 can be found in verses 24 and 25. They have eschatological significance and will now be examined for Jesus'

allusion to the bridal intimacy in the bridegroom's embrace.

In verse 24, Jesus prayed that at the completion of His mission, those the Father had given Him might be with him. Explicitly expressed as a “want” and a “desire”, He prayed, “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am” (NIV). Milne notes that the expression “with me” is a language of love that “anticipates the embrace of His beloved bride in the glory that is to be.”[25]

The reference here is to His eschatological glory revealed at the *Parousia* (Greek for 'the Second Coming'), when the intimacy that God desires is consummated in the celebration of the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. The intention behind this request is clear in the rest of the verse, “and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world” (NIV).

This request is nothing short of Jesus' longing for all His disciples to be present with Him in His eschatological glory. His intention is for them to witness the reality and finality of this central truth concerning intimacy first hand.

[25] Milne, 251.

The primeval shared glory of verse 5 resurfaces in verse 24 as the genesis of love and intimacy the Father has for the Son. Janzen best explains the significance of this repeated phrase "before the creation of the world" in verse 24,

> If the love between the Father and the Son is a love of mutual indwelling, and if that love, that mutual indwelling, predates the creation of the world (John 1:1–2, 17:5), this must mean that the world was created out of the matrix of that love. The love spoken of in John 3:16, then, is a love that seeks to reclaim and redeem a world gone astray from that love, and to draw that world back into the sphere of that love.[26]

Jesus had alluded to this mutual indwelling earlier in John 15 as the branch abiding in the vine. From the above discussion, the reference to "the glory you have given me because you loved me" in verse 24 suggests that glory is defined in terms of love and intimacy Jesus experienced with the Father. Love is by nature centrifugal, whereas love that is centripetal is by nature, selfish and narcissistic.

The final reference to *Pater* in verse 25 comes with an adjectival descriptor, 'righteous Father.' Burge[27] sees

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[26] Janzen, 9.

[27] Gary M. Burge, *John. NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 469.

this description of 'righteous' as a reminder that it is God's righteousness that forms the basis of His upright judgement of the world. The problem is not the world's limited accessibility to knowing God but the world's refusal to acknowledge that God can only be known through the Son whom He had sent. Their rejection stands in stark contrast to those who accept the Son and embrace Him and the Father. They will not experience this inexpressible love known only between Father and Son.

Rejecting and accepting are reflected in the rest of verse 25, "Righteous Father, even if the world does not know you, I know you, and these men know that you sent me" (NET). Burge sums up the position by maintaining that God loves us with the love He holds for His Son.[28] The prayer and the chapter then ends in verse 26 on the note of a commitment to continually reveal the knowledge of God's love to believers attuned through their abiding intimacy in Christ. "I have revealed you to them, and I will continue to do so. Then your love for me will be in them, and I will be in them" (John 17:26, NLT).

The Conclusion for John 17

In the petitions of John 17, we first see that Jesus prayed for himself, for the glory of His mission to

[28] Burge, 469.

reveal God's desire for intimacy in the life He had come to bring. Then He prayed for His disciples as this mission continues in and through them. Upon completing their mission, Jesus prayed that they would be with Him to celebrate the culmination of the intimacy that God has so desired.

Malatesta regards John 17 as "the prayer of the Mediator of the New Covenant" dwelling more intimately with life eternal in all who believed in Him, from His disciples to future believers.[29] This is the purpose of the Fourth Gospel in John 20:31. "But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that by believing in Him you will have life by the power of His name" (NLT).

The Conclusion for the Biblical Foundations

The above three biblical passages were selected to support the central truth that God's desire for intimacy is fundamental to the ultimate redemption of His creation as His beloved bride.

Genesis 17 reveals the early initiatives in restoring intimacy through God's covenant with Abraham for a sense of belonging and permanence in His covenantal embrace.

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[29] Edward Malatesta, "The Literary Structure of John 17" (*Biblica*, 52 No. 2, 1971, p 190–214), 214.

Exodus 25 presents God's provision of a place where the whole covenant community can access intimacy with God in worship that is finally and fully secured through Jesus' death on the Cross.

John 17 reveals God's desire for intimacy in the glory of Jesus' mission that confers life and upon its completion to reveal the glory of His intimacy with the Father that culminates in the Bridegroom's Embrace.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, a suggested response to a renewed understanding of this subject from the biblical foundations in this chapter is to consider an invitation to a four-part course entitled Journey to Holiness. This invitation is an opportunity to personally encounter for yourselves a newfound embrace of the bridal intimacy in worship for greater anticipation of our Bridegroom's return.

For those who are interested, you can register for this course on the website https://journey2holiness.org/contact-us. We would like to hear from you.

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The Bridegroom's Embrace

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"HOW AWARE ARE YOU OF JESUS' DESIRE FOR INTIMACY WITH YOU?"

This question is a deeper way of asking a more familiar version, "Do you know how much God loves you?". This book attempts to deepen a greater consciousness of God's desire for intimacy with us and thereby awaken an intimacy within us as the Bride of Christ which embraces a greater readiness and longing for Christ's return.

Rev Dr Noel Goh started pastoring a Methodist Church in Singapore since 1988. In 2016, he took an early retirement to answer God's call to go to the nations to help prepare the church as the Bride of Christ for His Return through the course 'Journey to Holiness'. This publication is extracted from his Doctorate in Worship Studies awarded by Robert E. Webber Institute of Worship Studies in Florida, USA.