

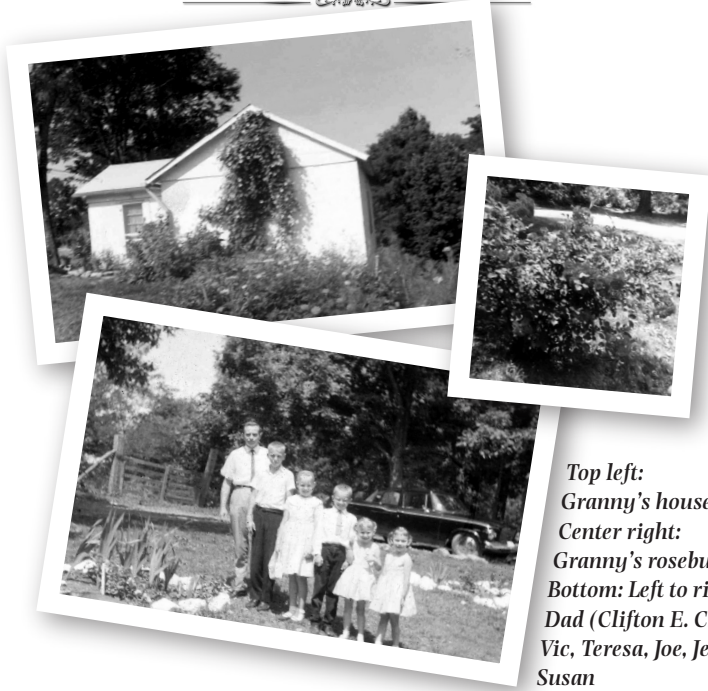
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# INTRODUCTION



*Top left:  
Granny's house  
Center right:  
Granny's rosebush  
Bottom: Left to right—  
Dad (Clifton E. Chester, Jr.),  
Vic, Teresa, Joe, Jenny,  
Susan*

Stepping out of Grandmother's front door was like stepping into a sea of zinnias, dahlias, marigolds, and lilacs. The colors, very bright and shimmering with the sun's soft glow, were dazzling to my youthful eye. They were a constant, perplexing thought in my curious mind. How could such beauty come from dry, crusty, ugly, old seeds?

At the age of forty-plus years, I still ponder the question. It is one of the beautiful paradoxes of life: God takes what is ugly, unappealing, and unassuming and transforms it into a wondrous work of beauty! Gardens are continual reminders of the matchless, unspeakable love of God. I have an idea that is why my grandmother loved her garden so.

One of the fondest memories of my childhood is laboring with Grandmother in her beautiful flower garden. Her work began with seeds, and neighbors and relatives freely shared flower seeds with her, knowing of her passion for gardening. Grandmother worked tirelessly: planting, watering, and weeding. Her mind seemed to be a thousand miles away when she was working in the soil. However, many of her days were filled with aches and pains for which there appeared to be no medical explanation. We knew she

was frail, but we also knew she had to work with her flowers, just as she had to breathe in order to live. Her garden became a source of healing for mind and soul. Very often she broke into one of her favorite songs,

I come to the garden alone,  
While the dew is still on the roses . . .

So, despite the pain, she led her grandchildren out into the sunshine as a mother duck leads her little ducklings.

And He walks with me,  
And He talks with me,  
And He tells me I am His own,  
And the joy we share as we tarry there,  
None other has ever known.

We came to understand later in life that grandmother's garden took on a life of its own—much more than a lesson in agriculture. It was an instruction in productive living.

Grandmother was an educator in her younger years, teaching in a one-room schoolhouse filled with children of all ages. She applied those educational skills as she directed her grandchildren in the aspects of gardening. One of her favorite sayings was the oft-quoted adage: An idle mind is the devil's workshop. In fact, she said it so much, I was sure it was Scripture. We learned quickly that an afternoon of arguments or disagreements earned us a few hours of weed-pulling and bucket-toting. She would calmly say, "You kids have too much time on your hands; you've been idle too long." I declared one day that it felt as if I had toted by bucket a river full of fresh water for Grandmother's flowers! However, by making us tote water and pull weeds, she taught my brothers, sisters, cousins, and me invaluable lessons about working together, working through the strife, overcoming anger, and continuing to work together.

Recently I was prompted to search the Scriptures, to study more deeply some of the marvelous events that took place in the long ago, events that unfolded in the gardens of Scripture. It became apparent early in the study that there were some beautiful parallels contained in the garden stories, perhaps the most important events in the history of humankind. There has been no greater expression of harmony given to man and woman than the circle of unity represented in the biblical gardens. Scripture calls out to us, beckoning, "Come to the garden!" Experience the unity of purpose, a oneness with the Creator that is unparalleled.

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# BIBLE GARDENS

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In her garden, Grandmother taught many lessons: the value of work, having a purpose in life, and the personal satisfaction of a job well done. She also taught us to be frugal, as she instructed us to take the wash water from her wringer washer and water her flowers. The flowers minded not that the water was a little soapy or a bit dingy. They simply stood a bit taller and their colors seemed more vivid. The lessons we learned were priceless. Gardens continue to intrigue me—especially so with the gardens of Scripture. And the lessons to be found in Scripture’s gardens continue to amaze me—they, too, are priceless.

## *Garden of Beginnings*

The Garden of Eden, a true earthly paradise, displayed dramatic scenes of divine love. In the creation of the human race, God formed man from the dust of the ground, and sheer joy must have filled Adam’s heart when God presented him with a precious gift—woman. At that moment in time there was perfect unity and peace between the divine and the mortal. The union was so sweet, so rare. God came in the cool of the evening to stroll with Adam through the garden.

Unfortunately, tragic images unfolded as together man and woman broke the Father’s heart by their disobedience. The earthly paradise, a garden of beginnings, was lost, replaced by ground cursed with thorns and thistles. However, before casting Adam and Eve out of the garden, God, in His infinite love, left Adam and Eve with a ray of hope for the healing of mankind (Genesis 3:15). The Creator’s intent was to restore the harmony that had graced the garden in the beginning.

## *Garden of Agony*

The second garden of great importance in Scripture was the Garden of Gethsemane, a peaceful retreat for a suffering Savior. As in the first garden,



there was perfect unity—the unity of Father and Son. We see the enormous effort it took for both to achieve perfect harmony. Every parent agonizes as he has to say no to a child. The Father had to say no to His Son because unity had to be restored, and the only means of restoration was the blood of a perfect sacrifice (Hebrews 9:22–28). The child, in this case Jesus, delivered heartfelt supplication, saying, “Let this cup pass.” A measure of healing and comfort took place when an angel came and ministered to Jesus in that hour of intense, agonizing entreaty—the hour when His sweat was as great drops of blood. That garden of great emotional suffering reminds me that there were times when suffering was needed, and God used that suffering, working all things for good!

### *Garden of Sacrifice*

Another garden, not usually remembered as such, was the garden associated with Jesus’ death and burial. John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, wrote: “Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden was a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. So there they laid Jesus” (John 19:41–42). In previous studies I believe it had slipped right

past me: “In the place where He was crucified there was a garden.” No greater love was ever shown to humankind than the life that was offered that dark day. The price that was demanded and paid was the life of God’s own dear Son. Our sin-stained souls were like ugly, crusty, old seeds. God took what was detestable, and in a moment of sacrificial love, transformed human existence. Until that time death had been winning, but no longer!

“And in the garden was a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid” (John 19:41). Jesus Christ overcame death and He overcame the grave . . . in a garden. As in the first two gardens, there is a common thread that binds—that common thread is unity.

As Jesus experienced the betrayal, the mockery, and the degradation of the cross, we have a glimpse of One who yielded—completely yielded—in order to preserve the unity between Father and Son. Their oneness provided the means of healing for the souls of men and women.



*How  
does  
one come to  
experience the  
beauty of unity  
found in the  
gardens?*



## *The Paradise of God*

The last garden mentioned in Scripture is remarkably like the first. It is called Paradise. The apostle John said: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God” (Revelation 2:7). The Spirit-guided word brings each of us full-circle, back to the place of beginnings, the place God intended us to dwell. John tells of the beauty of this garden: “A pure river of water of life, clear as crystal” proceeding from the very throne of our Father and of the Lamb, Jesus Christ. In the first Paradise there was a tree of life, the fruit of which brought eternal life when eaten. John said this new Paradise will again have a tree of life, “the leaves of which were for the healing of the nations.” There is no greater power to heal than the power of Jesus’ blood. Within the revelator’s Paradise, the union of Father, Son, and obedient believers is pictured as they assemble near the river of life. “They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. There shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever.” John’s inspired apocalyptic portrait is one of unity that has been restored between deity and humanity.

## *Questions*

After pondering these thoughts about the four significant garden scenes in Scripture, the logical questions in my mind were: “How does one realize this hope? How does one come to experience the beauty of unity found in the gardens?” The religious world offers so many conflicting answers to those simple questions. The worldview of religion is very convoluted. Paradise takes on a whole new meaning if one is speaking of the paradise of Islam, a zealous dogma that denies the Sonship of Christ. Within the broad spectrum of Christianity itself, there are various doctrines about a multitude of spiritual beliefs. One body of believers tells me that I must accept Jesus as my Savior in order to be saved. Another body tells me that I must be baptized to be saved. Another instructs that baptism may be performed by the sprinkling or pouring of water, as well as immersion. Still another teaches immersion as the biblical form of baptism. There is so much confusion in the religious world. Can these many diverse sets of beliefs all be truth? Is God the author of confusion?



## *The Answer*

The answer is simple. God speaks to us in His word about Himself, saying He is not the author of confusion but of peace (1 Corinthians 14:33). God's word never lets me down! We are led back to Scripture to find clarity, back to the simplicity of God's word given to us by a Father who delights in order, not chaos. His creation speaks of order. His redemptive plan virtually shouts of order that becomes such a powerful yearning as we live in a very stressful, chaotic society. Perhaps that is one of the reasons people have such a fascination with gardens. What are they seeking? Solace perhaps. A quiet escape from a chaotic world. A time to reflect. For me it was something much more profound, a reason that has an eternal purpose. My search was not in a physical garden but in the beautiful gardens that are found in Scripture. Within each of them I found a treasure—unity. Webster defines unity as “oneness: a condition of harmony; accord: continuity without deviation or change (as in purpose or action).” Unity was one of the valuable lessons taught by my grandmother as she instructed us in the methods of gardening. It is also the concept God wants us to appreciate, a concept that is fully magnified in the four gardens of Scripture.

*Many  
divisive  
actions are  
repeated today  
because the  
lessons of the past  
have not been  
learned.*

## *Come to the Garden*

Do you seek after eternal things? Do you want to know how to achieve the unity that God desires for His creation? Knowing the importance the Creator has given this quality of unity, I resolve to dig a bit deeper into Scripture for understanding. It will require time and effort, but all good things require such, don't they? It may require delving into some history books, and not just the history books of the Bible but a few secular history books as well.

There are at least four good reasons for acquainting oneself with the history of the Lord's church. First, this kind of study helps the genuine Bible student understand how erroneous doctrine was planted one seed at a time in the pristine fields of New Testament Christianity. Second, the events of church history serve as a measure of warning or rebuke to those who would depart from pure doctrine. Third, it answers the age-old question: “How did we come to have so many denominations, each seeking Christianity?” And finally, a sharp contrast suddenly appears as one reflects on church history. On one side there is strong evidence of the tangled, futile attempts of





man-made doctrine, and on the other side is the absolute simplicity of God's plan, the pure truth. The complete history of the church tells us much about the planting of foreign seed in the early years of the church, seed that grew into strife and division within the body of Christ. Many of these divisive actions are repeated today with the same sad results because the lessons of the past have not been learned.

The garden stories of Scripture contain the most important events in the history of human flesh. Reading about what transpired in the beautiful gardens of Scripture stirs within one an intense desire to experience what Adam and Eve experienced in their blissful first home—a fellowship or partnership, a oneness with the Creator. It causes us to desire the Father's wondrous comfort that Jesus experienced in the Garden of Gethsemane—a unity of purpose. Jesus' love was so pure and so trusting that He put His physical life into the Father's hands, preserving oneness by submitting to His will in the most difficult of circumstances.

Our desire is also drawn to the future, a desire to experience the garden seen by John the revelator. It was as if God the Father were drawing us full-circle into His divine redemptive plan, again beckoning us, "Come to the Garden."



## DIGGING DEEPLY WITH QUESTIONS

1. What lessons might children learn as they help tend a physical garden?
2. Describe the unity that existed in the Garden of Eden.
3. What event destroyed the unity of the first garden?
4. How does the Garden of Gethsemane remind us that God uses suffering, working all things for good?
5. How did John describe the place of Jesus' crucifixion and His place of burial?
6. What is the common thread that binds the major gardens of Scripture?
7. What is the last garden in Scripture?
8. How is the last garden in Scripture much like the first?
9. After studying the gardens of Scripture, what questions logically come to mind?
10. What are some of the various present-day doctrines about Paradise and salvation?



11. Explain why the many diverse sets of religious beliefs cannot all be correct.
12. According to 1 Corinthians 14:33, of what is God the author?
13. What is the definition of unity?
14. If we are to achieve religious unity, what will be required?
15. List four good reasons for reacquainting oneself with the history of Christ's church.



## DIGGING DEEPER WITH SCRIPTURE REFERENCES

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*Genesis 3:15*

*Hebrews 9:22–28*

*John 19:41–42*

*Revelation 2:7*

*1 Corinthians 14:33*



## OUTLINE OF CHAPTER 1

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*Introduction:* Grandmother's garden and gardens of Scripture.

- I. The Garden of Beginnings.
- II. The Garden of Agony.
- III. The Garden of Sacrifice.
- IV. The Paradise of God.
- V. The Beauty of Unity.
- VI. The Author of Peace.
- VII. Come to the Garden.

*Conclusion:* God seeks to establish unity.

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# GARDEN TOOLS

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My grandmother instilled the love of the earth in her children and grandchildren. From my early years, there are fond memories of playing in the dirt. As we prepared to go to the garden, Grandmother had us gather essential tools—a spade or hoe for digging, pruning shears for lopping off unwanted branches, a bucket for watering the plants, and a hat for protection from the noonday sun. Tools were essential so we always began with adequate preparation.

As we study one of the most significant passages in Scripture, we realize, with a measure of excitement, there was another who made vital preparation before He entered the garden. His preparation is recorded in detail in John's Gospel, chapter 17. After praying in this garden, He entered yet another garden, the garden of suffering.

Jesus had just finished the Passover supper, at which time He instituted the Lord's supper. Although it is unclear when Judas actually left the upper room, at some point He departed to carry out the treacherous betrayal. In John 14, 15, and 16, the apostle recorded the Savior's powerful last sermon. Jesus spoke of the vine and the branches, the love of the brethren, the world's unjust hatred of Him and His followers, the coming Spirit of Truth or helper, and His sorrow turned to joy. How appropriate that our Lord closed the meeting in the upper room with a prayer, the longest of our Lord's prayers recorded in Scripture. It was not just any ordinary prayer, if there is such a thing. And it was not a matter to be postponed. Time was short; His life was drawing to a close. This preparation had to be completed—the tools gathered so to speak—before leaving to go to the Garden of Gethsemane.

What thoughts ordinarily fill the mind of one who is facing death? My grandmother expressed concern for certain grandchildren—their safety, their welfare, and their spiritual strength. There were those with whom she wanted to speak one last time—a grandson who was laboring on foreign soil



as a missionary, for example. Because of the great distance, she was unable to speak with him, but she took comfort in knowing that he was preaching to lost souls. She told her children of her love and devotion that had been evident in her every action.

Her last words to me are etched in my memory. From my recollection of those words, I know her main concern was for her loved ones: When did she last see each of them? Did she speak what needed to be spoken before it was too late? Did she tell them she loved them? Did she give them what they needed in order to survive after she was gone? After reading John's account of our Lord's remarkable prayer, it appears Jesus had these same concerns.

### ***Tender Address***

Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You, as You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him. And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent (John 17:1–3).

These words begin one of the most beautiful, heartfelt prayers ever recorded, opening with the tender address: Father. Jesus used the same address at least six times in the lengthy prayer, sometimes adding the words *holy* and *righteous*—the manner in which He addressed the Creator expressed the unity, respect, and love of a very special father-son relationship.

Throughout Jesus' short ministry, He often said, "My hour is not yet come." However, following the departure of Judas and the last admonitions to the eleven, He spoke to the Father saying, "The hour has come" (John 17:1). His expressed desire was that we know Him and, through that knowledge, have eternal life. The phrase "know Christ" or "know God" is used extensively in John's writings. We must remember that to know God and Jesus Christ is not only to believe in them intellectually but also to obey their will (1 John 2:3–5). Obedience is synonymous with "knowing God." Burton Coffman says, "This knowing God and Christ is not a casual thing, but something extensive and profound."

Jesus went on to pray about how this would be accomplished: "I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do. And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was" (John 17:4–5).



## *Vision of Victory*

As our Lord uttered this prayer, He viewed His work on earth as complete, but He had not yet gone to the cross. Why did He take such a view? This occasion is remarkably similar in nature to Abraham's offering of Isaac. You will remember that Isaac, as he and his father were ascending Mount Moriah, inquired about the ram to be sacrificed. Moses recorded Abraham's response: "My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering" (Genesis 22:8). Abraham viewed the offering as already having been completed. In fact, the writer of Hebrews said he received Isaac after the offering as if he had been raised from the dead. In Abraham's mind the act had been completed! So when he received Isaac, he was in a figurative sense receiving him from the dead (Hebrews 11:19). The same thought was expressed in the Savior's prayer. Jesus was so committed to accomplishing the Father's will that He viewed His work as finished.

I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth (John 17:14–19).

## *Definition of Success*

As expressed in His prayer, Jesus' fervent desire was that His disciples maintain unity. He knew they would be scattered as sheep without a shepherd (Mark 14:27). He knew there were those from within who were seeking to disrupt the present unity. Jesus also knew there would be those from without, those of the world who would seek to splinter the steadfast unity of the believers. In this heart-rending prayer, He voiced those concerns to His loving Father.

Jesus talked to the Father specifically about those He loved, those disciples who followed Him during His short three-year ministry on earth. His concern at that moment in time was for their faithfulness, their sanctification (being set apart from the world), and their unity. Faithfulness to what? The truth. Sanctification by what? The truth. And unity through what? The truth. He did not desire unity merely among the twelve disciples. He wanted all of His followers to be likeminded. Jesus pointed the religious world, and all those who would follow Him, to truth. That which defines those who are faithful, sanctified, and united is a clinging to truth.



Jesus continued His prayer for all believers:

I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me (John 17:20–21).

As we read this tender entreaty, the words sent up to the Father should stir within us wonder and joy. The Lord prayed for you and for me! When sorrow was lying as a heavy burden on His shoulders, He was thinking of you and of me. Guy N. Woods admonishes:

Should not all of us daily reflect upon this fact, and to ourselves utter these words: “The Lord prayed for me when death for Him was but a few hours away.” This truly is a humbling thought and one that should renew our assurance in Christ Jesus.

In His darkest hour, the Creator of all that we see and know cared for us—He made supplication to the Father on our behalf. His fervent desire was that we be one. He then stated the reason: “That the world may believe that You sent Me.”

The lack of unity constitutes one of the major downfalls of those who profess Christianity. Christians have been commissioned by Christ to take His message into the entire world. The way the world regards Christianity is critical to the success of that mission. And how can the world believe in the Christ of the Bible when those who call themselves Christians are so divided?

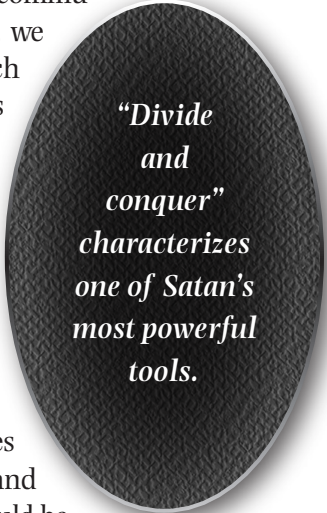
### ***Uniquely Unified***

Through His prayer, Jesus taught that part of what makes His message believable is the unity that can be heard from our lips and seen in our lives. We are faithful to the truth, we are unified through the truth, and we are sanctified by the truth. Our faithfulness, unity, and sanctification create a precious oneness with God, and harmony with each another. No good is accomplished when the world hears us preach of love and unity but witnesses division and strife among us. In fact, more harm is done than good. Burton Coffman says,

Nothing is more productive of infidelity and unrighteousness than the conflicting doctrines of professed followers of Christ. By multiplying divisions, Satan has hindered numberless millions from obeying the gospel. No greater need could be imagined than that of the unity of the church of the living God; but, alas, only a certain kind of unity will avail anything; and that is the kind of unity Jesus identified in this prayer, a unity like that between the Father and the Son (*Commentary on John*, 386).

## ***Harmony through Truth***

Harmony is accomplished only through truth, and the world sees the difference between truth and make-believe. This truth is also borne out with our church family—the church-house walls have ears and the community is listening. Bickering and infighting repulse those in our community. Rather than engaging in such non-Christian acts, we should heed Paul’s instruction: “If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men” (Romans 12:18). This concept also holds true in our own families, as our children view us and as the world views us individually—Christian women and men, Christian wives and husbands, Christian mothers and fathers. Our children are watching us to see if the truth from our lips measures up to the lives we daily live. Individuals outside the body of Christ are watching those in the body to see if we “practice what we preach.” Our lives preach sermons every day, whether in our homes or workplaces. What are we preaching? Self-seeking and hypocrisy, or unity in the love of God? The unity we should be seeking is the kind that Jesus desired—oneness based on truth. That being accomplished, our relationship with God and with our fellowman will be as God wills and as Jesus petitioned in His prayer for unity.



*“Divide  
and  
conquer”  
characterizes  
one of Satan’s  
most powerful  
tools.*

And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one. I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me (John 17:22–23).

When we follow Jesus’ plan, those of the world see a united front and know that the Father has loved them just as He loved His own precious Son. Furthermore, Satan sees oneness within the ranks! “Divide and conquer” characterizes one of Satan’s most powerful tools. If he can fragment a physical family or the family of God, he has won a victory. Jesus alluded to this



tactic as He spoke to the critics of His day: “If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand” (Mark 3:24–25). Jesus also affirmed this in His prayer of John 17. When we stand united in truth, opposing evil, the world will know that God has sent His Son.

*When  
we stand  
united in  
truth, opposing  
evil, the world  
will know that  
God sent His  
Son.*

As Jesus continued praying, He gave us a second glimpse of former things. In verse 5, Jesus had spoken of that which existed before the creation of the universe. Then in verse 24 He said, “Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24). John began this Gospel for believers with similar thoughts: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). As he drew to the close of his account of the life of Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, John recorded Jesus’ precious words of affirmation uttered in the midst of supplication for others. Jesus reflected on a love that has existed before time itself—the love of the Father for the Son and the love of the Son for the Father.

At the conclusion of His beautiful prayer for unity Jesus said,

Oh righteous Father! The world has not known You, but I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me. And I have declared to them Your name, and will declare it, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them (John 17:25–26).

In the shadow of the cross, Jesus made supplication for Himself and for all believers. Usually Matthew 6:9–13 is referred to as the “Lord’s Prayer” when, in fact, it is a model prayer for the disciples. The prayer recorded in John 17 truly is the “Lord’s Prayer.” We might also view it as a preparation of sorts, a gathering of tools as Jesus was about to enter the Garden of Gethsemane. With regard to the subject of religious harmony, there is found no greater discourse in Holy Scripture than the prayer recorded by John, spoken by our Lord to His Father just before the betrayal. If such importance was given to Jesus’ preparation before He entered the Garden of Gethsemane, hours before His death, we must without hesitation read and meditate on this prayer, as He made supplication first for Himself, next for the apostles, and then for all believers that they may be one: one in purpose, and one with God.



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## DIGGING DEEPLY WITH QUESTIONS

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1. What essential task must be accomplished before laboring in a garden?
2. How did Jesus make preparation before entering the Garden of Gethsemane?
3. How did our Lord close the meeting with the disciples in the upper room?
4. What thoughts fill the mind of one who is facing death?
5. How did Jesus begin His prayer in John 17?
6. Explain how Jesus could view His work as complete, although He had not yet been crucified.
7. Jesus knew His sheep would be scattered, but He fervently prayed for their \_\_\_\_\_.
8. Jesus' concern was for the disciples' faithfulness, sanctification, and unity through \_\_\_\_\_.
9. For whom did Jesus specifically pray?
10. What reason was given for the importance of the unity of believers?
11. Harmony is accomplished through \_\_\_\_\_.
12. What will happen when believers are united?
13. How long has the Father loved the Son?
14. What is the appropriate title for Jesus' prayer recorded in John 17?

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## DIGGING DEEPER WITH SCRIPTURE REFERENCES

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*John 17:1-3**Genesis 22:8**Mark 14:27**John 17:22-23**1 John 2:3-5**Hebrews 11:19**John 17:20-21**Mark 3:24-25**John 17:4-5**John 17:14-19**Romans 12:18**John 1:1*