

The Blood of Jesus and His Heavenly Priesthood in Hebrews

Part IV: The Present Work of Christ in Heaven

Philip Edgcumbe Hughes

REPRESENTATION

"Christ," says the author of Hebrews, "has entered . . . into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf" (9:24). There in that sublime sanctuary which is the presence-chamber of God Himself the risen and glorified Savior presents Himself, not to claim benefits for Himself, for He is crowned with glory and honor (2:9), but as our representative and mediator to receive for us the eternal blessings which His atoning death has procured. Yet these blessings are not, so to speak, external to or apart from Himself, for in presenting Himself at the throne of grace He presents also those who through divine grace have been made one with Him. It is the union of believers with Christ that ensures their acceptance before God. The royal favor with which he is received embraces at the same time those who are one with and in Him. As Paul says, God "raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:6). The Christian's whole and only status before God is in Christ. True and wonderful though this is, however, the sphere of the Christian's existence is still here on earth. He is still beset by temptations; he is hampered by weakness and frustrated by failings; he falls

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the fourth in a series of articles entitled "The Blood of Jesus and His Heavenly Priesthood in the Epistle to the Hebrews," which were the W. H. Griffith Thomas Memorial Lectures given by Dr. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes at Dallas Theological Seminary, November 14-17, 1972.

short of "the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13); the perfection for which he longs is not yet. He needs a holiness not his own, made available to him by the Lamb of God who has made atonement for his sins and who now interposes Himself as his representative in the heavenly sanctuary. And this is the representation which Christ fulfills as He appears in the presence of God for us.

In the earthly sanctuary the levitical high priest entered into the holy of holies taking with him the blood of the victim that had been slain at the altar of sacrifice. In himself, this high priest had no more right of entry than did the people for whom he was acting, for he, like them, was a sinful man for whose sins, no less than for those of the people, atonement had to be made. Accordingly, the blood he carried into the holy of holies was not his own but the blood of the victim which had been offered up in his stead. Our great High Priest, however, being entirely without sin, had no need to take the blood of another into the sanctuary; nor did He need to present His own blood, for since the blood was the token of the life that had been offered up in sacrifice, and since He was both offerer and offering, He, the sinless and glorified incarnate Son, presents not His blood but Himself in the heavenly sanctuary, into which He has the full and inalienable right of entry. This unique victim, unlike the victims of old, is not left outside, but in the power of His risen life He Himself, and none other, has passed into the glorious presence of God, where He "has gone as a forerunner on our behalf" (Heb. 6:20). It is He Himself, in all the perfection of His, and our, exalted manhood, who now represents us there.

BENEDICTION

An important function of the royal high priest is to bestow the divine blessing upon the people of God. Thus we read in Leviticus 9:22-23: "Then Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them; and he came down from offering the sin offering and the burnt offering and the peace offerings. And Moses and Aaron went into the tent of meeting; and when they came out they blessed the people, and the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people." And the form of the high priestly blessing, which is simply the declaration of the blessing which comes from God, is given in Numbers 6:22-27: "The LORD said to Moses, 'Say

to Aaron and his sons, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them, The LORD bless you and keep you: the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you: The LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them'." So also we are told that Melchizedek, priest of God Most High, blessed Abraham (Gen. 14:19), and in doing so he prefigured the blessing which was to flow from Him who is our Melchizedek to all who through faith are the children of Abraham (cf. Gal. 3:29). Indeed, the blessing promised to the world through the seed of Abraham is, as Paul teaches, concentrated and fulfilled in the single person of Christ (Gal. 3:8, 16-17).

The blessing which our heavenly High Priest bestows from the true sanctuary above is made effective through the outpouring of His Holy Spirit upon all flesh. Hence the affirmation of Peter on the day of Pentecost: "Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this which you see and hear" (Acts 2:33). Through the blessing which the outpouring of the Holy Spirit guarantees to us, our Redeemer exercises in our midst His threefold office of prophet, priest, and king. As prophet, He who is the Truth continues to teach us through the apostles whom He Himself had taught, and to whom He had specifically promised that the Holy Spirit, whom the Father would send in His name, would teach them all things and bring to their remembrance all that He had said to them (John 14:26). Accordingly, in the apostolic doctrine of the New Testament we have the authentic doctrine of Christ Himself, and through these writings He does not cease to lead us, as our Prophet, into everlasting truth. The New Testament Scriptures belong to the benediction of our exalted High Priest.

The central truth with which we are blessed, thanks to the enlightening action of the Holy Spirit, is the knowledge of the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. But the Spirit of Christ does not only bring us face to face with evangelical truth, He also applies the saving work of Christ to our hearts and lives. Through the blessing of the Holy Spirit which Christ has poured out from heaven we are enabled to experience the regenerating power of God. The benefits of the Savior's atoning death are made a vital and transforming reality, so that we who, like the prodigal in the parable, are alienated from God by the rebellion of our sin are

blessed by restoration to the family relationship, calling penitently and joyfully on God as our Father, as "the Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God" (Rom. 8:14-16).

So we experience the reconciling priestly work of Christ in our lives; and so also, by the operation of the same blessed Holy Spirit, we surrender ourselves to His service as our King. It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to "sanctify Christ as Lord in our hearts" (1 Peter 3:15), so that we know daily the benediction of His sovereign rule in our lives. Our heavenly High Priest, "is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven" (Heb. 8:1); but the same crucified Jesus, whom God raised up and made both Lord and Christ, is at the same time, through the blessing of the outpoured Holy Spirit, enthroned in every believing heart (Acts 2:36 ff.) Thus the blessing of the prophetic, priestly, and kingly work of Christ is made a dynamic reality in our experience.

INTERCESSION

In consequence of the fact that His priesthood is everlasting, Christ, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews tells us, "is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (7:24-25). Our Lord's heavenly intercession is His continuing high priestly work whereby He achieves the divine purpose of "bringing many sons to glory" (2:10). It is, as we shall see, a most important and necessary work. "So great and glorious is the work of saving believers unto the utmost," John Owen comments, "that it is necessary that the Lord Christ should lead a mediatory life in heaven, for the perfecting and accomplishment of it: . . . It is generally acknowledged that sinners could not be saved without the death of Christ; but that believers could not be saved without the life of Christ following it, is not so much considered."¹

The most eloquent symbols of the intercessory function of the high priest are found in the prescriptions for the sacerdotal garments which Aaron was to wear. In the shoulder-pieces of the ephod two onyx stones were set on which the names of the sons of Israel were engraved. These stones are designated "stones of remembrance," because Aaron bore "their names before the LORD upon his two shoulders for remembrance." And attached in front

¹ John Owen, *An Exposition to the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia, 1869), V, 542.

to the two shoulder-pieces of the ephod was the breastpiece in which were set twelve precious stones, in four rows of three, also engraved with the names of the twelve sons of Israel; so that Aaron bore "the names of the sons of Israel in the breastpiece of judgment upon his heart" when he went into the sanctuary, "to bring them to continual remembrance before the LORD (Exod. 28:6-12; 39:1-14). Thus the people of God were carried by name into the divine presence, supported, as it were, in their weakness, on the strong shoulders of their high priest, and bound closely to his loving and compassionate heart. Their high priest was their remembrancer.

He who is the Good Shepherd knows His own sheep by name (John 10:3, 13). It is by name that as High Priest He intercedes for them in the heavenly sanctuary, supporting them with His victorious strength and ceaselessly surrounding them with His love. In the hour of testing His help is always at hand (Heb. 2:18). Precisely because "we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning," we are encouraged to "with confidence, draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (4:15-16). In his hour of trial Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, sees the heavens opened and Jesus standing at God's right hand to support him in martyrdom and to welcome him into His glorious presence (Acts 7:55).

Our Lord's intercession on our behalf is always infallible in its effectiveness. This we see even during His earthly ministry, for He assures Simon Peter as the time of his testing approaches: "I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again [as the Master's intercession ensures that He will], strengthen your brethren" (Luke 22:31-32). What confidence it should give us, not only that our High Priest always intercedes for us, but also that the Father always hears the Son (John 11:42)! And above all, in the "High priestly prayer" of John 17 we have a sacred glimpse of our Redeemer engaging in offering intercession to the Father for those who are His: "I am praying for them; I am not praying for the world but for those whom thou hast given me, for they are thine. . . . Holy Father, keep them in thy name which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. . . . I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil

one. . . . Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth.... I do not pray for these only, but also for those who are to believe in me through their word, that they all may be one. . . . Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which thou hast given me in thy love for me before the foundation of the world.... " (John 17:9, 11, 15, 17, 20, 24).

His intercession is our security. "Who will be the accuser of God's chosen ones?" asks St. Paul. "Will it be God himself? No, He it is who pronounces acquittal. Who will be the judge to condemn? Will it be Christ — he who died, and, more than that, was raised from the dead--who is at God's right hand? No, he it is who pleads our cause" (Rom. 8:33-34, NEB margin; cf. Phillips: "Who would dare to accuse us, whom God has chosen? The judge himself has declared us free from sin. Who is in a position to condemn? Only Christ, and Christ died for us, Christ rose for us, Christ reigns in power for us, Christ prays for us," i.e. "intercedes for us," RSV). Obviously, then, nothing can possibly separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, nothing in the whole of creation — not tribulation, distress, persecution, hunger, nakedness, peril, sword, not even death (Rom. 8:35-39). When the Christian falls into sin, Jesus Christ is still his righteousness, for it is still in Him, and not to the smallest degree in ourselves, that we are justified before God. There in the heavenly sanctuary He intercedes as our advocate (paraclete): "If a man should sin," says St. John, "remember that our advocate before the Father is Jesus Christ the righteous, the one who made personal atonement for our sins" (1 John 2:1-2, Phillips).

Moreover, our Lord's advocacy in heaven is reinforced, so to speak, by the advocacy of the Holy Spirit within us here on earth, in accordance with His promise that when He was glorified He would pray the Father, who would then send another advocate (paraclete) to be with us forever, even the Spirit of truth (John 14:16-18; cf. 7:39; 16:7). The sending of the Holy Spirit is a comprehensive blessing for which we are indebted to the intercession of Christ! And the Holy Spirit, who "bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God," inwardly "helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words," and he does so in harmony with the will of God (Rom. 8:16, 26-27).

Hence the apostolic injunction to "pray at all times in the Spirit" (Eph. 6:18). The intercession of the Holy Spirit in the temple of our bodies (1 Cor. 6:19) is united with the intercession of the Son in the sanctuary of heaven and brings the joy of heaven into the heart of the believer.

It follows that, since Christ is the sole mediator between God and men (1 Tim. 2:5) and our perpetual intercessor in the presence of God, there is no place for any other intercessor or mediator. To imagine that saints or angels can be influenced to intercede for us is not only a delusion, but also casts doubt on the perfect adequacy of the intercession of Christ on our behalf and thus is to deprive oneself of the fulness of the security which is available to us only in Christ. Our Lord clearly taught that no man can come to the Father except by Him (John 14:6) and that our requests to God are to be made in His name (John 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23, 24, 26), precisely because there is no other name which avails and prevails with God (cf. Acts 4:12).

In considering the intercessory work of our heavenly High Priest, there is of course no place for any kind of "dualistic" notion, as though a well-disposed Son were attempting to persuade a hostile Father to regard us with favor. God is not divided, and there is always perfect harmony between Father and Son. The oneness in purpose and performance in the relationship between the Father and the Son was plainly and constantly taught by our Lord, as the following quotations show: "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise;... I have come down from heaven not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. . . . My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me... . And he who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him. . . . I and the Father are one: . . . He who believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me. And he who sees me sees him who sent me. . . . Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me" (John 5:19; 6:38; 7:16; 8:29; 10:30; 12:44; 14:11). So also Paul asserts that the whole of our redemption, from beginning to end, is from God, since "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:18-21). And the author of Hebrews places the words of Psalm 40. "Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God," on the lips of Christ, explaining that "by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of

the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (10:7-10). The grace of God precedes and is the sole cause of our restoration: thus "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). Christ Himself is the supreme manifestation of God's love (1 John 4:9-10).

The intercession of the Son, then, is in no sense a pleading with the Father to change His attitude toward us. Nor does the Father have to be reminded of the full redemption that He Himself has provided for us in His Son. The presence of the Lamb bearing the marks of His passion in heaven is itself the perpetual guarantee of our acceptance with God, who gave His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. In ourselves, however, though we have the forgiveness of our sins through the blood of Jesus Christ and though we are united to Him in love and trust, we are unworthy because Christ has not yet been fully formed within us and we still sinfully fall short of the glory of God. This consideration explains our continuing need of the advocacy and intercession of Him who alone is accounted worthy before God (cf. Rev. 5:1-10). It is in His worthiness that we too rejoice in the blessings of the divine favor; and it is He who, by virtue of His atoning death on the cross, has entered as our forerunner into the heavenly sanctuary (Heb. 6:19-20), thus opening the way for us, unworthy though we are, into the glorious presence of God Himself. By the grace of God His merit has been reckoned to us as our merit; His heaven has become our heaven and His eternal glory our eternal glory. What, then, could be more appropriate than for me to conclude these articles, with the great exhortation of Hebrews 10:19-25 — an exhortation which stands logically on the firm basis of the wonderful doctrine of divine grace which has been engaging our attention?

Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

This material is cited with gracious permission from: x
 Dallas Theological Seminary
 3909 Swiss Ave. Dallas, TX 75204
 www.dts.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu