

During the forty days following His resurrection, Jesus came and went among His followers. Sometimes His appearances and disappearances were natural. Sometimes they were supernatural — as when He disappeared before the eyes of Cleopas and his friend (Luke 24:31), or suddenly appeared to the apostles in a locked room (John 20:19, 26). That is one of the reasons His *final* disappearance, His ascension, had to be so markedly different (Acts 1:9): it constituted a final farewell. There would be no more resurrection appearances (with the solitary exception of the appearance to Paul, 1 Cor. 15:8). Jesus' glorious ascension also serves as the model of what to expect when He returns (Acts 1:11).

What, then, is Jesus doing while we His people await His return? Here we could meditate usefully on His promise to go and prepare dwelling places for His followers, so that they might join Him one day (John 14:2–3). Certainly God's sovereignty is currently mediated through Christ (1 Cor. 15:24–28). But here I want to reflect on the intercessory work of Christ which is made possible by His ascension.

Christ's intercessory work is the second element of His high priestly work. As high priest, Jesus offered up a sacrifice — Himself, for He is both priest and offering — to satisfy divine justice and reconcile God's rebellious and alienated people to Himself. But now in heaven Christ's high-priestly work continues in a second phase. He is "able to save to the uttermost those who come to God by Him, seeing He ever lives to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7:25). In returning to His Father, "Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; He entered heaven itself, now to appear *for us* in God's presence" (Heb. 9:24 NIV).

Four observations on these texts and their contexts will display their power and relevance.

(1) The high priest of the Levitical priesthood could not continue in office; death made this high priesthood a succession (Heb. 7:23). Doubtless there were better and worse high priests, but this was common to all of them: they died. Poor sinners might be grateful for the ministry they discharged, but it was impossible to repose ultimate confidence in them. By contrast, Jesus "has an unchangeable priesthood" (7:24). He died, rose and ascended, and His intercessory work continues forever. "Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God by Him" — whether "uttermost" refers to endless duration, or to the perfect extent of this salvation, or to both.

(2) Moreover, this high priest "was fitting for us" (7:26; He "meets our need," NIV) in another way. The Levitical priests of the old covenant were themselves sinners. Daily they had to offer up sacrifices, first for their own sins, and then for the people's. The Law, in other words, appointed as high priests "men who have weakness." What horrible damage was done to the faith of ordinary believers by such wicked priests as Eli's sons (1 Sam. 2:12–25)? Though he did not take strong action against them, Eli certainly saw the problem. He remonstrated with them, "If a man sins against the LORD, who will intercede for him?" (1 Sam. 2:25). Who, indeed? How much *ultimate* confidence can poor sinners place in the intercession of another poor sinner?

But Jesus "does *not* need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people's" (Heb. 7:27). He Himself is "holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens"

(7:26). We need not trouble ourselves about the efficacy of *His* intercession. While the Law appoints as high priests “men who have weakness,” by contrast, “the word of the oath, which came after the Law, appoints the Son who has been perfected forever” (7:28).

(3) Reflection on these contrasts between the Old Testament priests and Jesus the High Priest enables us to grasp better some of the ways in which the two testaments are linked. Jesus is a minister “of the true tabernacle” (8:3); the old covenant priests served “the copy and shadow of the heavenly things” (8:5). Here the author of Hebrews shows he has reflected long on the thirty or so occasions when God, speaking in the book of Exodus, either admonished Moses to build the tabernacle according to the pattern shown him on the mountain, or said that he did so. The biblical text thus relativizes the importance of the tabernacle (and later the temple) from the beginning. They were never more than models, copies of the original, pointers to something beyond themselves. No doubt the copies had to have sacrifices of some sort (9:23), but the heavenly realities had one supreme and satisfactory sacrifice, as they have one victorious and enduring High Priest (9:24–28).

(4) Two misconceptions must be avoided when we think of Christ’s intercessory work. (a) We must not think that Christ’s intercession is necessary because the Father and the Son are at odds any more than we should think that the Father is implacably against us, while the Son is unreservedly for us. That will not do. After all, *God* so loved the world that He sent His Son (John 3:16). “*God* demonstrates His *own* love toward us, in that while we were

still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). Yet by virtue of His holiness, God, and no less His Son, stands in judgment against us. By virtue of His unfathomable love, which commissioned the Son, which brought the Son to the cross, God has provided a redeemer. Now, if God’s children sin — and which of us shall utterly escape sin before the parousia (1 John 11:6–2:2) — what will help them? Who will present their case before a holy God? Why, none other than our High Priest, who bore our sins in His own body on the tree. (b) We must not think of Christ’s intercessory work as *adding* something meritorious to the cross-work He accomplished. Rather, it is a way of picturing the ongoing *application* of that cross-work to believers who need it, not only at the moment of their conversion,

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but constantly. When Jesus intercedes for His people, He is not presenting their merits, or pleading extenuating circumstances, before a stern judge. Rather, He pleads His own shed blood, His own sinless perfection voluntarily laid down for God’s guilty image-bearers. This was the divine plan from the beginning.

Here is the basis for the Christian’s joyful confidence. The High Priest who intercedes for us is eternal, sinless, and pleads His own exhaustively sufficient sacrifice. We are accepted in the Beloved, and we rest. ■

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