

¹“Jesus Is Our Great High Priest”

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Hebrews 1:1–3

¹ In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. ³ The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.²

Have you thought about taxes lately? April 15, Tax Day, was last week. That was the deadline to file tax returns. I don't know how you do your taxes, but I use a tax preparer because he knows what he's doing. I trust that he will do what is right and do what is in my best interest. In a sense, he's an intermediary between the government and me. I trust that he'll figure out how much I owed in taxes, how much of a refund I'll get, and that he'll file the taxes correctly so that I won't have any legal problems. The first year I used him, I asked, “What happens if I get audited?” He told me almost never has any of his clients audited, but in the rare event that I should get audited, he would help me. In that event, he would be my advocate.

This is sort of what Jesus does for us. Now, I must admit, that's really a poor analogy. A better analogy would be this: We've been earning money for years, and haven't paid a dime in taxes. We've run up a huge tax bill that we can't hope to pay and now we're in trouble with the government. But we cry out to Jesus and trust that he's the only one who can help us. So he comes along, figures out how much we owe the IRS, files our tax return, and pays all our taxes. Not only that, he continues to pay any taxes that we will ever owe. He keeps filing our returns and if we should ever get audited, he would be our advocate, our tax attorney.

I'll let go of the tax analogy for now, but I hope that gives you a little bit of an idea of how Jesus represents us. If you are a Christian, you are represented by Jesus. Jesus has paid a debt that you could never pay. He paid for all your sins, your rebellion against, and disregard for, God. He presented his sacrifice to God the Father in heaven and he continues to represent you as your intercessor, your advocate, and your priest.

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² Unless otherwise noted, the Scripture quoted herein is taken from the New International Version (1984).

Today, I'll talk about how Jesus is our great High Priest. This message is in part a continuation of last week's message, when I asked, Where is Jesus now? and, What is Jesus doing now? Jesus is in heaven. He's running the universe from the throne of God. He intercedes for us. He's our advocate and our mediator. He's our high priest.

So, what is a priest? A priest is a person who mediates between God and others. He helps other people worship God and he helps others begin, or stay in, a relationship with God. He presents sacrifices on their behalf to God so that their sins can be paid for. He prays for people.

To help us understand the importance of the priesthood, we have to turn back to the Old Testament. Since I haven't talked too much about the Old Testament in this sermon series, I'll describe very quickly what happens in the first three books. The Bible begins with an account of the creation of the universe and moves very quickly to the creation of the first two human beings, Adam and Eve. They were made in the image and likeness of God. That means they were to live in a right relationship with God and they were supposed to reflect God's glory to others. But they didn't trust God and they disobeyed his word. Because of that lack of faith, they were removed from God's direct presence. And, really, that's true of all of us. We are all made to reflect who God is, but we ignore him, we don't trust him, and we don't live for him. We do life on our own terms. Because of our sin, there's a break in the relationship between God and people. God doesn't dwell directly in our presence: he dwells in heaven, and we dwell on earth. We don't see God, and often we don't feel his presence.

The book of Genesis shows what happens when sin enters into the world: people fight. They are jealous and petty. They kill each other. They are arrogant and proud and seek to make themselves famous, instead of worshiping God. Because of this, God brings judgment in the form of a flood. He saves Noah and his family, who found favor in his eyes, and he kills everyone else. This is serious business. The story is offensive to some people, but I don't think they understand the point: our sin is offensive to God. Because God created us, he owns us.³ We are made for his purposes, not the other way around.⁴ God would be just to wipe out the human race, but he doesn't.

Instead, God chooses a group of people, Abraham and his family, to have a relationship with him. He reveals himself to them by speaking to them. He provides for them. He protects

³ Pss. 24:1-2; 89:11; 95:3-5.

⁴ Rom. 11:36; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16.

them. He even saves them out of slavery in Egypt. And he gives them commandments to follow and rules and regulations for worship. Those regulations include instructions to build a tabernacle, a tent that represented God's presence among the people. We see all of this in Exodus, the second book of the Bible. In the third book of the Bible, Leviticus, God also gives his people instructions about how to worship at the tabernacle. Their worship included offering up animal sacrifices for their sin.

I realize that the concept of animal sacrifices might seem pretty primitive. But there's a logic to them. The people have rebelled against God. In other words, they've committed a crime against God. Because they've committed this great crime, there must be a punishment. To put it more strongly, there must be blood. So God graciously allows his people a way to avoid paying for their sin with their own blood. He lets them sacrifice animals instead. The people would have to provide their own animals, such as bulls and goats. They would bring them to the tabernacle, where priests would perform a ceremony. The priest would put his hand on the animal's head, symbolically transferring the sin of the people to the animal. Then the priest would kill the animal, splash some of its blood against the altar, and offer up choice parts of the animal on the altar, where they would be burned.⁵

Yes, this is all pretty gory. It's gross. And it's also costly: the people would have to provide animals, which would have been expensive. If the people were poor, they could provide birds like turtledoves and pigeons. Still, everyone had to pay. And that's the whole point. Sin is gross and it's costly. The sacrifice couldn't be some old, diseased animal. It had to be a perfect specimen, without blemish.⁶ It had to be a precious offering.

If you read through the book of Leviticus, where you find all of these regulations for sacrifices, you can't help but get the point that people are sinful and unclean. They're messed up. They can't approach God directly. If they want to have a relationship with God, if they want to live in his presence, they have to be made clean. Their sin has to be paid for. So they have to offer up animal sacrifices and go through elaborate ceremonies.

And this is where priests come in. They were the ones who oversaw all this activity. Not just anyone could be a priest. Priests were from the tribe called the Levites. Priests had to be

⁵ For example, see Lev. 1:1-9.

⁶ Lev. 1:3, 11; 3:1, 6; 4:3, 23; 5:15, 18; 6:6; 9:2-3; 14:10; 22:19-21; 23:12, 18.

without blemish. They couldn't have any injuries or deformities.⁷ But priests themselves were sinners, so they had to offer sacrifices for their own sins.⁸ They were sinners representing sinners, and so they could only get so close to God. We are told that God's special presence was found in the innermost part of the tabernacle, which was called the Most Holy Place. This is where the Ark of the Covenant was located. Priests could only go into the first chamber of the tabernacle, called the Holy Place

The only priest who could enter into the Most Holy Place was the High Priest, and he could go there only one day of the year, on the Day of Atonement. Only special people could serve as the High Priest. Aaron, the brother of Moses, was the first High Priest, and all subsequent High Priests were supposed to come from his lineage. The High Priest had a special role. He represented the whole nation of Israel. We can see that by considering his special outfit. He had to wear a breastplate, and on that breastplate were twelve rows of precious stones.⁹ Exodus 28:21 says, "There are to be twelve stones, one for each of the names of the sons of Israel, each engraved like a seal with the name of one of the twelve tribes." So the High Priest wore twelve precious stones, which represented all of the tribes of Israel. Exodus 28:29 says, "Whenever Aaron enters the Holy Place, he will bear the names of the sons of Israel over his heart on the breastpiece of decision as a continuing memorial before the LORD." Just a few verses later, we read about something that the High Priest wore on his head, another sign that he represented Israel. Verses 36-38 say,

³⁶ "Make a plate of pure gold and engrave on it as on a seal: HOLY TO THE LORD. ³⁷ Fasten a blue cord to it to attach it to the turban; it is to be on the front of the turban. ³⁸ It will be on Aaron's forehead, and he will bear the guilt involved in the sacred gifts the Israelites consecrate, whatever their gifts may be. It will be on Aaron's forehead continually so that they will be acceptable to the LORD.

Israel, God's people, were supposed to be devoted to the service of God. They were holy, which means they were consecrated to his service. On the Day of Atonement, it was if the High Priest bore all the sin of Israel and made atonement for them. The sin of the people was transferred to him, and he would then transfer it to animals. He had to do this so the people would be acceptable to God.

⁷ Lev. 21:18-21.

⁸ Lev. 4:3; Heb. 5:1-3; 7:27-28.

⁹ Exod. 28:15-20.

The Day of Atonement is described in Leviticus 16. It's worth looking at some of this passage because it helps us understand what Jesus did when he died on the cross and when he ascended into heaven. In verse 2, we see that God's presence was in the Most Holy Place, which is here called the "Holy Place." God would appear in the form of a cloud above the mercy seat, the cover of the Ark of the Covenant. Aaron had to wear his special garments and he had to bring a bull and two goats. The bull would be sacrificed for his own sins and his family's sins. One goat would be sacrificed for Israel, while the other would be the "scapegoat" that would be released in the wilderness. It represented sin being cast out of the presence of the Israelites.

We read about this in Leviticus 16:11-22:

¹¹ "Aaron shall bring the bull for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household, and he is to slaughter the bull for his own sin offering. ¹² He is to take a censer full of burning coals from the altar before the LORD and two handfuls of finely ground fragrant incense and take them behind the curtain. ¹³ He is to put the incense on the fire before the LORD, and the smoke of the incense will conceal the atonement cover above the Testimony, so that he will not die. ¹⁴ He is to take some of the bull's blood and with his finger sprinkle it on the front of the atonement cover; then he shall sprinkle some of it with his finger seven times before the atonement cover.

¹⁵ "He shall then slaughter the goat for the sin offering for the people and take its blood behind the curtain and do with it as he did with the bull's blood: He shall sprinkle it on the atonement cover and in front of it. ¹⁶ In this way he will make atonement for the Most Holy Place because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been. He is to do the same for the Tent of Meeting, which is among them in the midst of their uncleanness. ¹⁷ No one is to be in the Tent of Meeting from the time Aaron goes in to make atonement in the Most Holy Place until he comes out, having made atonement for himself, his household and the whole community of Israel.

¹⁸ "Then he shall come out to the altar that is before the LORD and make atonement for it. He shall take some of the bull's blood and some of the goat's blood and put it on all the horns of the altar. ¹⁹ He shall sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times to cleanse it and to consecrate it from the uncleanness of the Israelites.

²⁰ "When Aaron has finished making atonement for the Most Holy Place, the Tent of Meeting and the altar, he shall bring forward the live goat. ²¹ He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat's head. He shall send the goat away into the desert in the care of a man appointed for the task. ²² The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place; and the man shall release it in the desert.

There's a lot in that passage, but hopefully you understand the basic gist of it. The sin of Aaron and his family was transferred to the bull. Aaron slaughtered the bull outside the tent, then

brought the blood into the Most Holy Place to present it before God. Then he did the same with one of the goats, to make atonement for the people. The sacrifice enabled the people to remain in a right relationship with God. That's basically what atonement means: at-one-ment. Aaron also transferred the sin of the people—again, this is symbolic—on to the live goat. This showed that the sin of the people was gone. It was “outside the camp,” away from the community.

You may wonder, why all the blood? Why do Christians talk about blood so much? I think we find the answer in the next chapter of Leviticus. Leviticus 17:11 says, “For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life.” There it is. The blood represents life. The life of the animal was given so the lives of the Israelites did not have to be taken.

Now, you may be thinking, That's all very nice. That's a good history lesson. But what does that have to do with Jesus? And what does that have to do with me?

The answer is that Jesus is both the once and for all sacrifice, the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29), and the High Priest who presents his sacrifice to God.

Right before Jesus died on the cross, he said, “It is finished” (John 19:30). What was finished? After all, the story in the Bible continued on. Jesus rose from the dead in a glorified body, one that can never die again. And he ascended into heaven. And we're still here, waiting for Jesus' second coming, when he will make everything right. So, not all of Jesus' work was finished. But what was finished was his sacrifice. Jesus' death on the cross accomplished everything that those animal sacrifices couldn't. No other death or offering for sin is needed. The book of Hebrews makes this clear. Hebrews 10:1-4 says,

¹ The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. ² If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. ³ But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, ⁴ because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

Everything we find in the Old Testament, including the tabernacle, the priests, and the sacrifices, were a shadow of what Jesus did. They foreshadowed, or prefigured, what Jesus would do. And Jesus did what they couldn't accomplish. He offered his own life, a human life without blemish,

for other humans. Animal sacrifices didn't work because it was an animal for human substitution, which animals and humans aren't equal. Also, Jesus, in his divinity, is infinite. He is able to pay for the sin of anyone who puts his or her trust in him. His sacrifice covers a multitude of people. It has the power to cover any sin.

That is so important to understand. There is nothing that we can add to Jesus' sacrifice. Nothing else is required, and nothing else can possibly add to the value of Jesus' life. His sacrifice on the cross is all that we need to pay for our sins. No amount of good works, no amount of striving, will ever put us in God's good graces.

But Jesus did something else besides die on the cross. He rose from the grave, and he ascended into heaven, where he presented himself as the sacrifice. Remember, the High Priest on the Day of Atonement killed the animals outside the sanctuary, but then he had to bring the blood of the sacrifice into the tabernacle to present it before God. In a similar way, Jesus died outside the walls of the city of Jerusalem, and when he ascended into heaven, he presented himself as the sacrifice. He didn't literally sprinkle his own blood before God, but he remains the Lamb of God, a reminder that a sacrifice for sins has been made. We see this in Hebrews 9:11-14:

¹¹ When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation. ¹² He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption. ¹³ The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. ¹⁴ How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

When Jesus ascended, he entered into the true tabernacle, heaven. He didn't bring the blood of animals, because those could never save. Instead, he brought himself. And his sacrifice cleanses us from all sin.

Not only did Jesus present himself before God the Father. He also sat down. We saw that in the passage that was read at the beginning, Hebrews 1:1-3. Verse 3 says, "After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven." First, we see that Jesus purified us of our sins by his death. And we see that Jesus is at the right hand of

the Father, which is a way of saying that he has all the authority that God possesses.¹⁰ But notice that Jesus sat down. What does that mean? It means his work was finished. His sacrifice was over. He sat down. Hebrews 10:11-14 explains this well:

¹¹ Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. ¹³ Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, ¹⁴ because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.

The priests were standing because they always had to sacrifice more animals. Their job was never done. But that's not the case with Jesus.¹¹ He made his once-and-for-all, never-needs-to-be-repeated sacrifice, and he sat down.

But that doesn't mean Jesus isn't doing something right now. He is doing something. He's interceding for us. Hebrews 7:25 says, that Jesus "is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them." Jesus is able to save because he intercedes.

What does this mean? I think it means that Jesus continually pleads his sacrifice before the Father. His sacrifice is already done and can't be repeated. It's an event in history. But Jesus continually pleads the efficacy of it before the Father. It's as if God is about to look at us in all our sin, at all our worst moments, when we have ugly thoughts and desires, when we do things we wish we could take back. And then Jesus says, "Look at me. I died for them. I have always obeyed you, Father. Please forgive them." I say, "it's as if," because I don't think it quite works that way. God the Father knows everything at all times. But put this way, it gives us a sense of what it means. Robert Peterson, a theologian, puts it this way, "It must be understood that Christ's sacrifice is finished. It has been offered once for all time (Heb. 10:10, 14). It does not need to be repeated. However, while Christ's sacrifice is not continual, Christ does continually plead the efficacy of his finished sacrifice."¹²

¹⁰ Robert A. Peterson, *Salvation Accomplished by the Son: The Work of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 191: "The right hand of the God the Father is the place of the greatest honor and authority. When Christ ascends and sits there, he is honored as God and rules from his divine throne."

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 196: "Their standing indicated that their work was never done; they had to keep offering the same sacrifices for sin over and over. But Christ's sitting down indicates the finality of his atoning death."

¹² *Ibid.*, 243.

Another passage in the Bible, Romans 8:31-34, shows how this works. But I want to back up and read Romans 8:28-34. Paul, the author of Romans, tells us that salvation from start to finish is the work of God. And because it's God's work, nothing can tear Christians away from God. So he begins with these words:

²⁸ And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

For those that God has predestined and called, all things work together for good. God justified them, which means they are declared innocent. He will make them like Jesus. And one day they will be with Jesus and like Jesus, living in resurrection bodies. Paul says this is a done deal.

But Paul continues with these words:

³¹ What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? ³³ Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

If God is for us, who can be against us? No one. Who can bring a charge against us, saying that we are guilty? No one. God has already said that we are not guilty. Who will condemn us? No one, because Jesus intercedes for us, and there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1).

Who would bring a charge against us? Sometimes, it's us. We think we're not worthy. We feel guilty. Sometimes we stumble and we do things we know we shouldn't do. But if we do sin, we have someone in our corner, pleading his eternal sacrifice for us. That's what 1 John 2:1 says: "My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One." We must remember that we are not saved by our righteousness. We are saved by Jesus' righteousness. He is our representative, our advocate. He speaks to the Father on our behalf. John says, in the next verse, that Jesus "is the atoning sacrifice for our sins." The English Standard Version says that Jesus "is the propitiation of our sins." Propitiation is a big word. What it means

is that Jesus' sacrifice makes God favorable to us. He looks on us with favor. Jesus' death has reconciled us to God. God is not angry with his children because of who his Son is and what his Son has done.

I have said "us" a number of times, but I want to be clear here. Jesus' sacrifice only pays for the sins of Christians, those who have a real relationship with him, those who have seen their sin for what it is and have vowed to follow Jesus, those who trust that he is who he says he is and can do what he says he can do. In other words, Christians are people who aren't particularly good and who certainly are not worthy. But they're people whose lives have been transformed by God. They are people who belong to Jesus and are represented by him.

I heard an interesting question this week. It was posed by a man named James White, who is a defender of the Christian faith as well as an elder in a church and an author. He said, "When you woke up this morning, why did you not fear the wrath of God?" That question will either make sense to you, or it won't. If you're a Christian, you understand that God is angry over sin. And he's right to be angry over sin. Sin is rebellion against him, but it's also self-destruction. God is the best thing for us, and when we pursue other things instead of him, we harm ourselves. When we love and treasure things like money, or relationships, or entertainment, or people's approval more than we love and treasure God, we're worshiping those things and not him. Therefore, he is rightly angry over our sin. And if you understand who God is, how perfect he is, then you'll see how unworthy you are. That's how people like the prophet Isaiah and the apostle Peter acted when they encountered God. Isaiah said, "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty" (Isa. 6:5). Peter said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5:8). If you came face to face with God right now, what would your reaction be? If you're not a Christian, you may not understand that you're in danger. But here is the truth: you were made to worship God and you're not really doing it. One day, there will be a reckoning. Today is the day to put your trust in Jesus. If you want to talk more about that with me, please do.

There's one more way that Jesus intercedes for us. He's praying for us. Let me say that again: there is a man in heaven, right now, the God-man, Jesus Christ, praying to God the Father for Christians everywhere. You may know the story of Peter, Jesus' disciple who abandoned him when he was arrested and crucified. While Jesus was on trial, Peter denied knowing Jesus. But before that happened, Jesus knew all about it. Still, he told Simon this in Luke 22:31-32:

³¹ “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. ³² But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.”

Satan, the powerful, mysterious, supernatural evil being, wanted to destroy Peter’s soul. And he wanted all the disciples. The “you” in verse 31 is plural. It refers to all the disciples. But then Jesus gets more specific in verse 32, using the singular form of you to refer to Peter. Earlier, I said that sometimes we bring charges against ourselves. But sometimes the one who wants to bring charges against us is Satan, the “accuser of our brothers” (Rev. 12:10). Satan wants to condemn us.¹³ But Jesus stands up for his people, and he prays for them. He prayed for Peter, that his faith wouldn’t fail. I think that’s exactly what Jesus does for all his people. He prays the same kind of things in John 17, and he’s doing it now.

Jesus is our Great High Priest. He died for us. He rose for us. He ascended for us. He presented his sacrifice to the Father for us. He’s pleading for us. He’s representing us. And he’s praying for us. There is no one like Jesus. There is no other sacrifice. There is no one else who will take your case before God and say that you’re innocent. Put your trust in him.¹⁴

¹³ See Zech. 3:1-5 for an illustration of this.

¹⁴ If time allowed, I would also add that Jesus can understand what we go through, because he is a man who was tempted as we are. As the spiritual says, “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen, nobody knows but Jesus.” Hebrews 4:14-16 says,

¹⁴ Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.