

“Jesus Is Our Great High Priest”

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Last week, taxes were due. I don't know what it's like for you to file a tax return. Maybe it's simple and relatively stress-free, or maybe it's the opposite. Perhaps you file your taxes yourself, file them using software like TurboTax, or, like me, use a tax preparer. I also don't know if you generally get a refund, or if you owe money.

But imagine this situation: You've been earning money for years—decades—and haven't paid a dime in taxes. You've run up a huge tax bill that you can't hope to pay and now you're in trouble with the government. You owe more than you could make over the remaining years of your work life. You're afraid that you might go to jail for tax evasion. Who could bail you out?

That is, in a way, the way things are between us and God. We have a debt of sin that no amount of good works could pay off. But there is an advocate, better than any tax preparer, who can settle our debts. That someone is Jesus, the Son of God who became a man. In this analogy, if we cried out to him, trusting he alone can fix our situation, he would step into our lives, figure out how much we owe the IRS, file our tax return, and pay all our taxes. Not only that, but he would also pay any taxes that we would ever owe. He keeps filing our returns and if we should ever get audited, he would be our advocate, our tax attorney.

That's an imperfect analogy, but I hope that gives you a little bit of an idea of how Jesus represents us. Sins can be understood as debts, as crimes, as something of a disease like cancer, or simply as rebellion against a perfect Creator, Father, and King. But the point remains: If you are a Christian, you are represented by Jesus. Jesus has paid a debt that you could never pay. He paid the penalty 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.

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 these questions: 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 others to have a right relationship with God. He helps others worship 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 live 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 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.¹ We are made for his purposes, not the other way around.² 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 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

¹ Pss. 24:1-2; 89:11; 95:3-5.

² Rom. 11:36; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16.

his people instructions about how to worship at the tabernacle. Their worship included offerings of 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.³

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.⁴ It had to be a precious offering.

If you read through the book of Leviticus, where all these regulations for sacrifices are found, 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 without blemish. They couldn't have any injuries or deformities.⁵ But priests themselves were sinners, so they had to offer sacrifices for their own sins.⁶ 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

³ For example, see Lev. 1:1–9.

⁴ 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.

⁵ Lev. 21:18–21.

⁶ Lev. 4:3; Heb. 5:1–3; 7:27–28.

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.⁷ Exodus 28:21 says, “There shall be twelve stones with their names according to the names of the sons of Israel. They shall be like signets, each engraved with its name, for the twelve tribes.”⁸ The High Priest wore twelve precious stones, which represented all of the tribes of Israel. Exodus 28:29 says, “So Aaron shall bear the names of the sons of Israel in the breastpiece of judgment on his heart, when he goes into the Holy Place, to bring them to regular remembrance 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“You shall make a plate of pure gold and engrave on it, like the engraving of a signet, ‘Holy to the LORD.’ ³⁷ And you shall fasten it on the turban by a cord of blue. It shall be on the front of the turban. ³⁸ It shall be on Aaron’s forehead, and Aaron shall bear any guilt from the holy things that the people of Israel consecrate as their holy gifts. It shall regularly be on his forehead, that they may be accepted before 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 as 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.

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,

⁷ Exod. 28:15–20.

⁸ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

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 present the bull as a sin offering for himself, and shall make atonement for himself and for his house. He shall kill the bull as a sin offering for himself. ¹² And he shall take a censer full of coals of fire from the altar before the LORD, and two handfuls of sweet incense beaten small, and he shall bring it inside the veil ¹³ and put the incense on the fire before the LORD, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is over the testimony, so that he does not die. ¹⁴ And he shall take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger on the front of the mercy seat on the east side, and in front of the mercy seat he shall sprinkle some of the blood with his finger seven times.

¹⁵ "Then he shall kill the goat of the sin offering that is for the people and bring its blood inside the veil and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, sprinkling it over the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat. ¹⁶ Thus he shall make atonement for the Holy Place, because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions, all their sins. And so he shall do for the tent of meeting, which dwells with them in the midst of their uncleannesses. ¹⁷ No one may be in the tent of meeting from the time he enters to make atonement in the Holy Place until he comes out and has made atonement for himself and for his house and for all the assembly of Israel. ¹⁸ Then he shall go out to the altar that is before the LORD and make atonement for it, and shall take some of the blood of the bull and some of the blood of the goat, and put it on the horns of the altar all around. ¹⁹ And he shall sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times, and cleanse it and consecrate it from the uncleannesses of the people of Israel.

²⁰ "And when he has made an end of atoning for the Holy Place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall present the live goat. ²¹ And Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall put them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. ²² The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness.

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 the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the 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 For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. ² Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? ³ But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. ⁴ For 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 But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) ¹² he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. ¹³ For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, ¹⁴ how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to 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. At the beginning of Hebrews, we're told, in verse 3, "He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high." 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.⁹ 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:

⁹ 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 And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³ waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. ¹⁴ For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

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.¹⁰ 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 "he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession 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."¹¹

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 for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also

¹⁰ 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."

¹¹ Ibid., 243.

called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom 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 to these things? 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 with him graciously give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is 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 little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." 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 propitiation for 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 once heard an interesting question. Someone once asked, "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 worshipping 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 is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Isa. 6:5). Peter said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (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 love and 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, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, ³² but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, 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.¹² 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.

Let us not forget those famous words of Hebrews 4:14–16:

¹⁴ Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have 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 sin. ¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

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.

Hebrews 4:14–16 (ESV)

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¹² See Zech. 3:1–5 for an illustration of this.