

empowerment of Jesus' disciples for mission on account of his ascension. In Acts 5:31 we are told that God gives repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins on the ground of Jesus' intercession; recognizing that it is the ascended Jesus who is equipped to do so.

Let me come a final question – what happens next? The first thing is we do what we have been told. I love the question the angels ask of the disciples. They have just seen Jesus ascend into the sky and a cloud has hid them and the angels ask them, 'Why are you standing there looking into the sky?' I suppose I would have been standing there gawping into the sky if I had seen such a thing, but the point of the angels' question is obvious. You have your orders – get on with them. Don't stand cloud gazing. Don't stand there taking in the atmosphere. You know what you are called to do, now, go and do it. And what happens next? In Luke 24, after the ascension, after being parted from the One whom they loved most, we find the disciples in worship and back in Jerusalem, filled with great joy and continually in the Temple praising God. How different from the earlier scattering. Now we have excited and convinced and motivated believers.

But again we ask the question, What happens next? The same Jesus, the person, this man that they knew face to face for so long, that same Jesus will return from where he has gone and so the ascension cannot be the last word. We look for the Jesus who went to return; and this must be as much part of our lives as it was for these believers in the first century and for any who come after us. Wait for Jesus to come back. He is ascended, he is at the right hand of the Father, he is glorious. Worship him, witness to him and wait for him.

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The Ascended Jesus Interceding for Us

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Introduction

Our subject here is the intercession of Christ on our behalf. Let me explain how I intend to approach the subject. First, we are going to set the intercession of Christ in the context of the overall ministry of Christ. Second, we are going to look at the intercession itself and ask about its nature and purpose. Third, we are going to look at several key passages to try and gain a deeper insight into the intercession of Christ. Then finally we are going to consider how this teaching may be applied to our lives.

The Context

In order to understand the intercession of Christ we have to understand how it fits into the overall context of the ministry of Christ. There are various ways we could approach this but I am going to use a model for understanding the min-

istry of Christ that has been used for centuries, namely, that Jesus Christ is prophet, king and priest. This structure, in some form or another, was used, from time to time, before the Reformation but it was only when John Calvin took it up and used it that it became a standard template or matrix for understanding the ministry of Christ. Calvin emphasized its importance when he wrote, 'Therefore, in order that faith may find a firm basis for salvation in Christ, and thus rest in him, this principle must be laid down: the office enjoined upon Christ by the Father consists of three parts. For he was given to be prophet, king and priest.'¹ Since then, most theologians in the Reformed tradition have used this model as the basis for explaining the nature and significance of the work of Christ.

a. Jesus Christ as Prophet

As a prophet, Jesus Christ speaks forth God's word to teach and direct us (John 1:18, Deuteronomy 18:15-18 and compare Acts 3:32,33 and 7:37). The Jews, you may remember, asked John the Baptist if he was that prophet (John 1:21).

b. Jesus Christ as King

As King, Jesus Christ wins the victory, subdues his enemies and sits on his glorious throne. This is a common theme in the messianic passages in the Old Testament, particularly

the Psalms. It is brought to fruition at the Incarnation. See, especially, Luke 1:30-33 and John 1:49.

c. Jesus Christ as Priest

The priesthood of Jesus Christ involves two functions: first, to offer himself as a sacrifice for the sins of all those who will one day be in heaven; and second, to intercede for those same people. One of the great themes of the letter to the Hebrews is that Jesus Christ is our great High Priest. Thomas Boston, in the early 18th century, summed up the priestly ministry of Christ in this way, ' . . .to expiate the sins of his people to purchase peace for them, and to manage their cause with God'.²

As you can see, then, our subject, the intercession of Christ, is located under this third aspect of the ministry of Jesus Christ, namely, his priesthood. With that context in mind, let us turn more directly to our subject.

2. The Intercession of Christ

Having established that the intercession of Christ is an aspect of his priestly ministry, we must make a further distinction, between the intercession of Christ before and after the ascension. My subject here is the intercession of the ascended Christ but in order to understand this, we must first notice that his intercession began while he was on this earth. Some of the older divines would argue that, in fact, Christ was interceding for God's chosen people even before the Incarnation and there are certainly hints of Christ's intercessory ministry even in the Old Testament (for example, in Job 16:19-21 and in Isaiah 53:12). I want to concentrate here, however, on his earthly intercession and his heavenly intercession.

a. The Earthly Intercession of Christ

There are various examples of the prayers of Jesus during his earthly ministry. For example, at the grave of Lazarus (John 11:38-42) and also when he foretold Peter's denial (Luke 22:31-34).

The most striking passage, of course, is John 17, often called the high priestly prayer of Jesus. Notice particularly vv.6-10 and vv.20,21. The key points here are that Jesus is praying only for believers and those who would one day become believers. This is quite important because, as our priest, Jesus prays for those for whom he died. Both parts of his priestly ministry are focused on God's chosen people, as we shall see more clearly when we come to Romans 8 shortly.

One important question, of course, is this: for what is Jesus praying? Derek Thomas says that we should learn from this prayer of Jesus in John 17 and recognize that Jesus is praying for the same things now in heaven as he was when he was on earth. He identifies five things for which Jesus prays:

- He prays that his disciples might be protected (v.11);
- He prays that we might have joy (v.13);
- He prays for the church's unity (vv.21,22,23);
- He wills that we may be with him (v.24);
- He wants them to see his glory.³

The Heavenly Intercession of Christ

With those few words about the earthly intercession of Jesus, we come at last to our main theme, the intercession of the ascended Lord. Let me make two general points as we begin to open up this theme.

First, like the atonement itself, the intercessory ministry of Christ comes from the Father's love. In other words, God does not have to be persuaded to love us by Christ dying for us and praying for us. It was because God loved the world so much that he sent his Son in the first place. Similarly, when Christ prays for us he is not trying to persuade an unwilling and unloving God to take pity on us. Rather, the ministry of intercession was given to him by the Father, because of the love of the Father.

Professor John Murray put it like this, 'As in the propitiation itself, there is no place for the notion that the Father is won over to clemency and grace by inducements which the Son brings to bear upon him. Just as the propitiation is the provision of the father's love, so must we say that the intercession is also.'⁴

Second, we must not imagine that because Christ continues to intercede for us that somehow the atonement was incomplete. Rather, we must recognize that on the cross Christ paid the penalty for sins once and for all. That sacrifice does not need to be repeated. All that is necessary for our salvation has been accomplished. The purpose of the continuing intercession of Christ is to plead our case before the Father on the basis of what he has accomplished. The intercession does not add to the atonement.

3. Key Passages

When we are considering the intercession of the ascended Christ, there are three particular passages of Scripture which warrant serious attention, namely, Romans 8:34 and its context, Hebrews 7:25 and its context and 1 John 2:1 and its context. In each of these passages we are told something significant about Christ's intercession on our behalf.

a. Romans 8:31-39 (esp.v.34)

This passage is set in the context of the eternal security of those whom God has chosen. Essentially the argument is that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. In fact, the only one who could condemn us (because he is the Judge) is actually the one who is interceding for us. In other words, the perseverance of the saints is founded upon the intercession of Christ.

As Professor John Murray says of this passage, 'The intercession is appealed to here for the purpose of assuring believers that there is an abiding concern on the part of the exalted Lord with the conflicts and trials which beset the people of God, and that this concern expresses itself in prayer on their behalf, that none of the assaults upon them will be successful in sundering the bond that unites them to him, and that they will be more than conquerors in every engagement with their adversaries. In a word, it is intercession directed to every exigency of their warfare and therefore to the supply of grace for every need.'⁵

One interesting point about this passage is that it also refers to the intercession of the Holy Spirit (v.26). Thomas

Boston very helpfully distinguishes between the intercession of the Holy Spirit and the intercession of Christ. He says this;

Christ intercedes for us in heaven at the Father's right hand . . . The Spirit intercedes in our hearts, upon earth . . . Christ's intercession is a mediatory intercession, wherein he mediates or goes between God and us; an office peculiar to him alone . . . But the Spirit's intercession is an auxiliary intercession to us, whereby he helps us to go to God in a right manner, prompting us to intercede for ourselves aright . . . The Spirit's intercession is the fruit of Christ's intercession, and what is done by the sinner through the Spirit's intercession, is accepted of God through the intercession of Christ . . .⁶

Boston sums up the difference with an illustration. He says that the difference is like the difference between the person who helps a poor man to write a petition which he wants to lay before the king, and the person who actually presents it to the king.⁷

b. Hebrews 7:23-28 (esp.v.25)

This passage teaches us that Christ is able to save completely because he is our great High Priest, and, more particularly, because he always lives to intercede.

c. 1 John 1:1 – 2:6 (esp. 2:1)

In this passage, John is teaching that Christians should not sin. Nevertheless, it assures us that if we do sin, we have someone who speaks to the Father on our behalf. On what basis can he speak to the Father? Because he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins. I think that the first two verses of chapter 2, on this subject of forgiveness, must be among the most profound, as well as the most comforting in the Bible.

How wonderfully John presents Christ to us. He is very concerned that we should not sin – and nothing we say about forgiveness and salvation ought to be understood in such a way as to play down the seriousness of sin. We ought not to sin, John writes, because sin is rebellion against God. Yet there is hope for the sinner. We have an advocate, one who speaks to the Father in our defence, and who does so with authority because he has come from the Father. This is the great mystery of the Incarnation, and at the same time its greatest glory: Jesus Christ speaks to us on behalf of the Father, and he speaks to Father on our behalf. Here, then, is the true mediator, the only one who can bring sinful men and God into a relationship again, who can repair the damage done by the Fall.

No wonder, then, that John was so concerned to emphasize the truth of the Incarnation against the heretics, because without the Incarnation there is no gospel! And yet, how can this be? How can sinners come into the presence of a holy God? How is forgiveness possible? The answer is given in v.2 where we are told that Jesus is the propitiation for our sins. What does 'propitiation' mean? Well, it means that

Christ has turned away God's wrath, he has dealt with it. The wonder of the gospel is that Jesus Christ, the second Person of the Trinity, turned the wrath of God away from us on to himself. He bore our sins and so he bore God's wrath. When he hung on that tree at Calvary he was being punished in your place and mine.

Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
In my place condemned he stood,
Sealed my pardon with his blood;
Alleluia! what a Saviour.

This passage is teaching us, then, that Jesus Christ is able to intercede for us before the throne of God because he has paid the penalty for our sins.

4. Conclusion & Application

I want to draw something of the threads of this together in the form of several points of application. In what ways does the intercession of the ascended Christ impact upon our Christian lives?

It assures us of our salvation;
It reminds us of the great love of God for us;
It gives us hope, even when we have sinned;
It brings encouragement and strength for daily living.

May God help us to understand and to benefit from the intercession of the ascended Christ.

Notes

- 1 Institutes 2/XV/1
- 2 Thomas Boston *The Complete Works of Thomas Boston* edited by Samuel MacMillan Vol.1 p.403.
- 3 Drerek Thomas *Taken up to Heaven: The Ascension of Christ* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 1996) pp.124-126.
- 4 *Collected Writings* vol. 1 p.57.
- 5 *Collected Writings* vol. 1 p.55.
- 6 *The Complete Works of Thomas Boston* vol.11 p.60.
- 7 idem

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