

What Is Our Lord Jesus Doing Today?

By Philip Venables

Introduction

We, as Christians, tend to think of the past and future in respect of our Saviour. As regards the past we focus upon the death, burial, resurrection and ascension of our Lord. In respect of the future we think of our Saviour returning to bless His people and judge this earth. But what of the present ministry of Jesus?

What is He doing now? To answer this we can say that He is very busy. He is busy acting for the good and benefit of His people. He is in heaven acting as our high priest and advocate. These are two different, but important ministries. To understand these ministries let us consider someone on a cliff top. In this situation he needs help to make sure that he does not fall over the cliff. This is the work of our LORD as high priest. He is busy and active seeking to prevent us falling over the cliff into sin. However, if the person does fall over the cliff they need someone to come and rescue them at the bottom of the cliff. Accordingly, if we, as Christians, do fall over the cliff into sin we need our Saviour to come and rescue us from our desperate predicament. This is provided by our LORD acting as advocate.

The work of the high priest then is very much one of preservation, whilst that of the advocate is restoration. As our high priest the Lord is always on duty. As our advocate he is only called into action at certain specific times. His work as high priest has to do with fellowship; keeping us as His people in the enjoyment of God's favour. As advocate His work has to do with justice; the maintaining of a right relationship with God. As high priest we consider the believer in the family of God continuing to enjoy the favour of the Father. As advocate we are in the courtroom of God; we are looking at justice being done before a righteous judge.

High Priest.

The ministry of our Lord Jesus as high priest is dealt with in the book of Hebrews. In Hebrews we are looking at a group of Christians who came from a Jewish background. Many of them were hesitating in their faith and there were teachers around who were encouraging them to go back to the old way of doing things. They wanted them to go back to the way of the temple which meant the way of priests and sacrifices etc. The writer to the Hebrews is ministering into this situation in order to encourage these believers to keep going. Here is one example: **“Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity”** (Heb 6:1a). In fact the main thrust of the book of Hebrews is that of maintaining our faith in the true way of the true and living God.

In order to do this the writer arranges his material so as to convince these hesitating believers that their situation in Christ is far better than it was in Judaism. Jesus Christ is the reality who fulfills all the shadows of the old system. If we see the shadow of someone we love we are not satisfied until we alight on the reality of that person. In many ways the argument in Hebrews focuses around the work of high priest. He was the key figure in ensuring the functioning of the Judaic system. In particular, his work on the day of atonement (see Leviticus 16) was absolutely key for the proper functioning of the sacrificial system. On that day he went into the Holy of Holies with the blood of the offering for the sins of himself and the people. In doing this he ensured that the people were kept in fellowship with God. The scripture in Hebrews 9:7 reads **“But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance”** (Heb. 9:7).

But now we have one who supersedes all this. We have one who has entered heaven itself; not an earthly shadow, but a heavenly reality. He does not have to appear once a year in the presence of God. Rather, He went in there once for all and now appears there continually. Accordingly, the book of Hebrews concentrates very much on the issue of our LORD as high priest. In many ways from 4:14 to 10:25 the writer is proving that we have a greater high priest who in every way is superior to the original earthly high priest. The reason the writer argues this way is that if he proves that our high priest in heaven, is superior to the Old Testament high priest, then the readers have no reason to go back to the Old Covenant ways. The old sacrificial system functioned around the role of the high priest. The new sacrificial system functions around the work of our Great high

priest, Jesus Christ.

You may not be a Jew, but the basic principle of knowing the superiority of our Lord Jesus is just as important for you. This is because we have many pressures upon us encouraging us to go back to our old ways and our old life. The fact that Jesus is superior to all encourages us to persevere in our faith.

Qualifications Of A high priest

Hebrews 5:1-5 tells us that to be high priest you have to be taken from among men (v1) and be appointed by God (v4-5). Our Lord Jesus fulfills these criteria.

However, our Lord is of a different order of priesthood from the Old Covenant high priest. The Old Covenant high priest was Aaronic. But our Lord is of the order of Melchizedek (see Hebrews 7:1-5). This scripture takes us back to the majestic, but mysterious figure who meets Abraham in Genesis 14. The details given of Melchizedek in Gen. 14 lead the Hebrew writer to conclude that the high priesthood of our Lord Jesus is superior to the Aaronic and eternal in its character.

The Characteristics of our high priest

- He never dies. **“Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood”** (Heb. 7:23-24).
- He is faithful; He never fails. The Old Covenant high priest was a failure himself; he could not totally be relied upon. But our Saviour is utterly reliable (see Heb. 3:17).
- He is merciful; he knows what it is to be man. He felt the extremity of sin (see 3:17). All the rest of us have been broken by sin before it has run its full course. But this man felt the full strength of sin because He could never be broken by it. He can feel pity for us then in all the onslaughts of sin against ourselves.
- He is perfect. **“Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens”** (Heb. 7:26). There is no blemish in his character whatsoever.
- He is loving. Thomas Watson quaintly puts it like this: *“When Christ has done dying He has not done loving”* (1). Love is really the motivating force of all of our Saviour's gracious persevering interest in us. It is beautifully symbolized in the garments of the Old Covenant high priest. On his breastplate situated over the place of affections the instruction was to, **“mount four rows of precious stones on it. The first row shall be carnelian, chrysolite and beryl; the second row shall be turquoise, lapis lazuli and emerald; the third row shall be jacinth, agate and amethyst; the fourth row shall be topaz, onyx and jasper. Mount them in gold filigree settings. 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”** (Ex. 28:17-21). His people are on his heart; all of them.
As Charitie Bancroft states in her marvelous hymn on the high priesthood of Christ: *“my name is hidden in His heart”* (2). The individuality of the stones intimates how he individually loves each one of us.
- He is strong. The high priest's clothing also had the names of the tribes of Israel on the shoulder pieces of the ephod. This was so that Aaron could, **“bear the names on his shoulders as a memorial before the LORD”** (Ex. 28:12b). The shoulder intimates the place of strength. He remains eternally strong. He can never weaken in his capacity to maintain us in the field of God's favour. He is ever strong for us.

Role of high priest.

In a sense it is a go-between role. E.H. Trenchard observes that a high priest *“stands between God and man and it is an essential condition of his service that he should have perfect contact with one and the other”* (3). The role then involves representing God to the people and the people before God. Accordingly, in that role the high priest needs to know the experiences of the people. Both in Hebrews 4:15 and 2:18 the writer indicates how our Saviour perfectly knows what human experience is in every way excluding sin.

His sacrifice.

The great thing the high priest has to do initially is to make a way of fellowship between man and God. He has to deal with that which bars us from fellowship with God. In Heb. 2:17b we see how our Saviour has worked to remove all God's righteous anger against the sin of His people; He has made, **"atonement for the sins of the people."** More accurately the word here should be rendered "propitiation" not "atonement". This means that He, our Lord Jesus, has offered Himself as the offering which in being offered receives all the wrath of God upon Himself. And that wrath is then removed from us. Oh how we should be thankful and praise Him for doing this for us.

In Heb. 7:27 the contrast between all previous priests and our Lord Jesus is brought out. **"Unlike the other high priests, He does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for His own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when He offered himself."**

The finality of the sacrificial work of our Saviour is further seen in Heb 9:24-26 when we read: **"For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; He entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. Nor did He enter heaven to offer Himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not His own. Otherwise Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But He has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of Himself."**

If we then return to the cliff-top image which we commenced with, we can see how our Lord has given Himself in sacrifice so as to place us securely on the cliff top. We are, as it were, now feeding on luscious pasture on that cliff top in the field of his favour. Having established us there He is now working to keep us there. This brings us to the second great aspect of His high priestly work; He is interceding for us.

His intercession

In Heb. 7:25 we read, **"therefore He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them."** Similarly in Romans 8:34b Paul informs us that Jesus, **"is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us."** Let us then think of some of the characteristics of that intercession.

When it started? It appears that Jesus started this ministry on earth. So we read in Heb 5:7 that, **"during the days of Jesus' life on earth, He offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save Him from death, and He was heard because of His reverent submission."** This ministry He now continues in glory.

His ministry continues now It is good to remind ourselves that this ministry of interceding for us is ongoing. It is not some past or future issue; it is a now issue! **"For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands 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). How wonderful to think that as you are reading this your Saviour is now representing you in the throne room of heaven.

His intercession is music to our ears! The Old Covenant high priest's robe had, **"pomegranates of blue, purple and scarlet yarn around the hem of the robe, with gold bells between them"** (Ex. 28:33). Accordingly, when the people were waiting for the high priest to re-appear after his annual visit into the Holy of Holies with the blood of the sacrifices, the ringing of the bells would be "music to their ears". This was the case because no ringing bells would mean a dead priest which would mean the sacrifice was not accepted, which in turn would mean that they were banished from their God. How we should similarly consider the continual intercession of our Saviour in heaven as "music to our ears". It means we are accepted; we are found in favour with our God.

What does He pray for us John 17 is known as the great high priestly prayer of our Lord Jesus on behalf of His people. He prayed this as he prepared to leave for glory. In this passage we have some of the longings of our Lord for us His people. He is here asking the Father for the things that would keep us in the field of God's favour. Here are six petitions of Jesus our Lord:

- Protect them (v11-12a)
- Give them joy (v13)
- Keep them from evil (v15)
- Sanctify them (v17-19)
- Bring them to oneness (v 20-22)
- Bring them to myself so that they may share my glory (v24).

All of these requests are about us being kept together in fellowship with our God so that we are not derailed; so that we are not knocked over the cliff into sin.

The implications of His intercession So in view of these things what is our response? We must keep on having faith and we must keep on praying. We must keep on coming to the Father through the Son. We must, to put it pointedly, keep going.

To emphasise this let us look at two passages of exhortation which sandwich the teaching about our Lord's high priesthood in Hebrews. This placing of the exhortative passages at the beginning and end indicates to us how important it is to make sure that our interest in our Lord's high priesthood is not just left as theological titillation. Rather, they should deeply affect our lives.

Hebrews 4:14-16.

Here we learn that there is a throne full of grace. Whatever our need our Saviour is able to provide for us. He knows our situation. He knows the comfort we need; He knows the resources we need.

- You have loved people in various ways and they have turned around and "kicked you in the teeth". He knows about that. Those that He loved and cared for nailed Him to a cross.
- You have difficult relationships. He knows about that. He has lived in a family.
- Work circumstances are difficult. He knows about that. He worked in a workshop.
- Life seems too busy. He knows about that. Many sought Him out for help. **"That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases"** (Mark 1:32-34a).
- People let you down in so many ways. He knows about that. How He must have felt in the garden of Gethsemane when the three who were closest to Him fell asleep. **"Simon," He said to Peter, "are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour?"** (Mark 14:37b).

Hebrews 10:19-25.

Here we learn that:

- He has done so much for us (v 19-22). He has given us a new and living way into heaven itself. We have a great high priest. And we have cleansed hearts.
- In view of all these great happenings let us keep going (v23). Our God is faithful and so we must be faithful. He will never let us down.
- Let us help one another to keep going (vv 24-25). Let us be full of encouragement for one another. Let us make sure we continue to meet together regularly. How shameful it is that we, Christians, are so casual about the privilege of meeting together in church. "Familiarity breeds contempt" appears to be written over our attitude to church fellowship.

Advocate

What do we think when we hear the word "advocate"? Well, if you went up to Chancery Lane or Lincoln's Inn in London you are likely to find a firm of advocates and what service will they be offering you? They will be offering to stand in your place; to represent you in court. This is the case with our Saviour He takes the initiative to represent us before the throne of God.

The Procedure

Let us go to the relevant passage here which is in 1 John 2:1-2. John has been telling his beloved readers to have a strong antipathy towards sin. That is the implication of his teaching in 1 John 1:5-

10. And if they sin they are to seek the forgiveness of their Father immediately for He is faithful and just to forgive our sins when we confess (see 1:9). It is one of the indications of our being Christian that we hate sin. So He does not want them to sin (see 2:1a). But, and it is a but which should be out of the normal, we do sin; sin comes into our lives. A crime is committed which breaks the Holy Law of God. We are found criminals before our God. Does this mean our salvation is finished? In order to answer this question let us investigate the issues involved.

Accusations are made. Our conscience arises to accuse us. Through this we are aware, in our hearts, of our failure to match up to God's holy standards. Furthermore, Satan, the adversary comes. Rev. 12:10b refers to him as, "**the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night.**" He scorns our profession of faith in Christ, questioning whether we can still be a child of God. The situation looks bad; our case stands demonstrably against us. But notice there is a hint of hope, the one on the throne is still our Father, but will He change when the full details of our case are known. The matter is all so very uncertain until our advocate arises.

We can notice the following things concerning our advocate:

1. He is with the judge. We might say carefully the two of them are "in cahoots". They are together in the matter. The advocate for the defense and the judge are on the same side.
2. Moreover, the Father has appointed Him to such a position. Accordingly, the Father / the Judge is duty bound to listen to what our advocate has to say.
3. He is always ready to take up our case. Other duties never detain Him. The "we have" in the present tense indicates He is always there for us.
4. It does not matter which of His children it is. He will represent any.
5. There is no sin too big. He will take up every case.
6. His evidence will not be warped. He is righteous.
7. His fees are always waived. He charges nothing to His clients.
8. The strength of case against the accused never puts Him off.
9. The quality of the other barrister or the tumult in the court never stops Him. Some may be "baying for blood". With great courage He always goes into the courtroom to put the case.
10. He can never be outwitted or defeated

So what does He do? He brings out the relevant material from His bag of evidence. He brings out Gethsemane. He brings out Calvary. He brings out His resurrection. He brings out His ascension. He says "I am the propitiation for their sins" (see 1 John 2:2a). I gave my life to take away all their sins. The anger of the eternal God has been taken away in total. No matter how much we sin if we are truly little children in the family of God then no accusation can carry the day against us.

And, of course the Judge on the throne who is our Father always accepts the evidence of our advocate. This is because He is the righteous One. He is always right.

So we look up to heaven and see ourselves at the bottom of the cliff and with great relief we reassure ourselves again that all is well. Our Saviour is there pleading our cause and He always wins the case. This is true for all of us as God's children. And with the requisite repentance on our part we are once again brought back to the top of the cliff and the "field of God's favour" (4).

An example

Zechariah 3:1-7 is a passage which graphically demonstrates the outworking of the principles of our Lord's advocacy. Here is Joshua the high priest and he is dressed in filthy clothes (v3). Satan is at the right hand of the angel of the Lord making accusations against Joshua (v1). The Lord is called to step in to rebuke and claim Joshua as His own, a burning stick snatched from the fire (v2). Surely that is what all of God's people are, sticks destined for burning, but we have been plucked from there.

Into this situation we see the beautiful advocating intervention of our LORD. "**The angel said to those who were standing before him, 'Take off his filthy clothes.' Then He said to Joshua, 'See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put fine garments on you'**" (v4). No longer can Satan accuse. The LORD gives us rich garments; rich garments of righteousness. "**God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of**

God” (2 Cor. 5:21). We are now fully accepted in the beloved. In such a situation Joshua was given the exhortation by the LORD, **“you will walk in obedience to me and keep my requirements”** (v7). Likewise we are given the exhortation to, **“live a life worthy of the Lord and please Him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God** (Col. 1:10b).

Conclusion

Our Lord's high priestly work on our behalf would then stir us to keep going for God. Whilst His work as advocate would stir us to hate sin and keep within the bounds of His will. Finally we remember what privileged people we are. The duties of high priest and advocate are only performed by our LORD for His people. Accordingly we read in John 17:9, **“I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours.”** And in 1 John 2:1 it is only the little children who are addressed. **“My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.”**

Oh how privileged we are. So, **“let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before Him He endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart”** (Heb. 12:1b-3).

Footnotes:

- (1) Watson, Thomas, Body of Divinity (The Banner of Truth Trust 1965 revised edition), p 183.
- (2) Bancroft, Charitie L, Before the Throne of God above. Hymn 503 in Praise!, Darlington 2000.
- (3) Trenchard, E.H., The high priestly Work of Christ by Heading J. and Hocking C.E (eds), Treasury of Bible Doctrine, 1977, pp204-5.
- (4) At <http://www.mountainretreat.org.net/classics/jesusadvocate0.html> there is a beautiful study by John Bunyan entitled; The Works of Jesus Christ As an advocate. This gives much food for thought and worship in consideration of our Lord as “advocate”.

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