

Christ Ascended for Us – ‘Jesus Our Ascended High Priest’

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Hebrews was written, you will remember, at the time when a group of people who had been Jews, had believed the gospel and had changed from following the traditions of their forefathers so that they would no longer go to the Temple to offer their sacrifices. They were Christians worshipping together, knowing Jesus Christ was their King and their Lord, knowing Jesus was the promised Messiah and the great thing, of course, was the fact that God had entered into a very specific relationship with them.

Under the Old Covenant God had entered into a covenantal relationship with his people – initially with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob – and, as part of that relationship, had offered them the privilege of worship. Thus, he gave them the gift of worship and did so in the context of his great covenant with them. Specifically, when they were given the covenant they were given the Law on Mount Sinai and they were also given a pattern of worship. So, through the process of sacrifice and through watching the priests, and participating in the worship of the Tabernacle (and later the Temple) they were constantly reminded of God’s nature and also constantly given access to him, despite their transgressions.

As important as this is, when Israel was given the gift of the worship, the Tabernacle, the Law and everything that went along with it, they were a wandering people, a pilgrim people, a journeying people. They had no home of their own. They had been slaves in Egypt for 430 years or thereabouts. Earlier their forefathers were wandering shepherds and nomads with little by way of territory to call their own. They were a wilderness, wandering people.

With this we encounter an important theme in the Bible; that of walking with God, being a people who follow God, who do not belong in a settled place on the earth, but travel with him; just as God himself is on the move. The notion of walking with God alludes to the idea of fellowship and communion and following him and in particular embraces trust and obedience. Such obedience is the expression of, and the outworking of, a relationship of love and faith. Thus, Abraham hears the word of God and trusts and obeys it on the ground of his faith. Of course, his trust grows and, bit by bit, as he experiences trials and tests, he comes to the point where he is even prepared to offer up his son Isaac, the only seed, the Promised One.

Throughout the Old Testament, then, there is this picture of a journeying people, a people on the move, moving towards

the goal and the destiny God has appointed for them. Abraham steps out from his homeland in Ur of the Chaldees not knowing where he was going, not setting his own direction in the world; following on after the direction God has set for him, believing the promises that God had made to him. He sets out, ‘not knowing where he was going’.

When we come through to the New Testament we see that this idea of walking with God or journeying with God is no less prominent. Thus, we encounter the themes of walking in the spirit, walking in the light, walking in obedience, walking in fellowship, walking in love and so forth. Indeed, does not Jesus Christ himself come, the express presence of the glory of God into our midst, tabernacling amongst us? He walks among us. He walks with his people. He touches, heals, talks and leads them on. Throughout the Gospels we see this picture of Jesus as the great Shepherd King calling his sheep to himself, gathering them from all the nations of the earth, bringing them to a new resting place. He is always journeying ahead.

Elsewhere in these studies, we have considered Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem. Jesus is heading forward on his journey. He is walking with his people and teaching his disciples along the way, but he is leading them as the Great Shepherd to the destiny that God has appointed for them. Part of the problem with the disciples, of course, is that they did not want that destiny to be their destiny; they had a different idea about where the journey should end.

If we had time we could go through many passages in the New Testament where this idea of walking with God, following God, obeying God, trusting God are found. Indeed, they saturate the pages of the Scriptures so that, when we come to Hebrews, we are not surprised that it is a prominent theme here, also!

Thus, the book is full of imagery drawn from the experience of the Old Testament people and their tabernacle. Interestingly, even though the Temple was still standing when the author wrote Hebrews, he never actually talks about the Temple. It is as though, in choosing to talk about the Tabernacle, he is saying, ‘Well look, what is your own history telling you? You’ve always been a pilgrim people. When was God closest to you? When you were on the move? When was God dwelling in your midst in great clouds of glory? Of course, the glory of God filled the Temple in Solomon’s day but by the time of the New Testament the picture is of a temple that is very polluted. The glory seems to have departed and Jesus as the great King Priest engages in John 2 in cleansing his Father’s temple.

Thus, the writer to the Hebrews seems to have picked up this idea of the Tabernacle almost as a theological symbol saying, ‘I want to point you back from the structure of the temple which has stood for hundreds of years. I want to point

you back beyond the time when you settled in your land and beyond the time when you had any sort of security and political structures or any protection. I want to point you back all the way to the very beginning of your history. What did you have? You had a tabernacle not a temple. You were a moving people, a people following God.'

But the idea of a journey is there in other ways. Thus, we are told in Hebrews that God's people are heading towards a goal. The goal is entering in to the rest of God – the Sabbath rest of God. In other words the author is saying, 'You can't settle down here'.

Perhaps I may be permitted to make several applications at this point. A friend of mine says, 'It's OK to settle in, but the moment you settle down you're in trouble'. So you settle in to a place and you minister there but you never settle down in that final foundational sense. You are always on the move to the resting place – ultimately to the resting place where there is nothing but quiet water, where there is nothing but green pasture, where there is nothing but a restored soul. You are not there yet. You have got to pass through a lot of wilderness on the way. There is quite a lot of wilderness through which the church has to pass. The wolves are often about the door. Thus, we come to understand that we are heading somewhere. Indeed, this can be part of the problem with friends, even our closest friends, our family perhaps, who may not yet know the Lord. They cannot understand the journey we make and the decisions that we take because they have are so contrary to the world's principles of security and settling down and foundation building and tall tower building and all the other things that the world pursues.

The end point of that journey can be described in a couple of ways in Hebrews. In 2:10 we are told that the end point of this journey is this: 'It was fitting for him from whom are all things and through whom are all things in bringing many sons to glory to perfect the author of their salvation through suffering.' The end point of our journey is not simply a resting place here on earth. The resting place is the new heavens and the new earth where there will be many, many sons brought to glory: a multitude, the book of the Revelation says, 'from every tribe and tongue and people and language, a multitude which no man can number

Hebrews 2:10, then, depicts the church as a the journeying people, a journey that brings many sons to glory. It is, however, linked to chapters 3 and 4 which describe the resting place of God and where the idea of the author of their salvation – Jesus Christ – is also, seemingly, on a journey. Thus, it declares that, 'It is fitting for him from whom are all things and through him are all things to perfect the author of their salvation through suffering'. It follows that, not only does the writer to the Hebrews allude to this journey in the use of the tabernacle and not only does he say that the children of God are, in the present, on this journey to glory, but that the Son himself has come on a journey. He has come from the Father's throne, from the Father's presence. He has entered into this world of sin and pollution. He has taken human flesh and lived in the limitations and the likeness of sinful flesh. So he knows what it is like to be a man in the middle of a situation where all you have got is trust in God. He knows what it is like to have a finite mind. He knows what it is like to feel tired and confused and perplexed. He

knows what it is like when the pains of hunger are ripping at your tummy. With this in mind, the writer says, 'Through all these things the Son has been made perfect'. This is a strange statement to make of the Son! Was he not always the perfect Son of God? The answer, I think, is not that he had some imperfection in him which needed somehow or other to be worked out of him by suffering. The key lies, rather, in the fact that in Hebrews the idea of perfection is related to being fitted for the task, made appropriate for its purpose. Thus, Jesus Christ had to be fully fitted for the task of being our High Priest by suffering all the things he suffered on the earth . . . not just his crucifixion. He had to be fitted for the task of being our High Priest so that through these sufferings he could identify with us and, as the writer says a little later, 'sympathise with us in our weaknesses'. He had always known his Father and trusted his Father and obeyed his Father, but now he had to do that in his human nature. Now as a man he had to learn what it was to trust. Now as a man he learned what it was to obey. He had to learn as a man what it was to trust God when there was nothing but darkness. He had to be fitted, be perfected in that sense, to be our merciful and faithful High Priest.

So he too has been on this journey. In 2:11 it says this: 'For both he who sanctified, that is Jesus, and those who are sanctified that is us, are all from one.' Now my translation has 'one Father', some have 'one source' and still others have 'one family'. The translation is uncertain, but I think 'one Father' most likely. Jesus comes from the Father and we do too, although in a different way. He has come from the Father in all eternity, in his divine nature, and took human nature to himself in the incarnation. By contrast, we have not come from the Father in all eternity, nor do we have a divine nature. However, the same Father who created the man Jesus in the womb of the virgin Mary is the same Father who has created you in the womb of your earthly mother. As he came from the Father he was on a journey to go back to the Father, but in this return he was not going by himself. He was taking back with him a great multitude that God had given to him. Jesus Christ has come, he has gathered us up, he is taking us on a journey back to his own home – back to the temple in which his Father dwells – the eternal heaven that reigns over all things. So he is on this journey with us and he is teaching us as he goes.

Consider 2:12: 'I will proclaim your name to my brothers in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise'. As we are going on this journey gathered up by Jesus Christ, as we travel he teaches us. 'I will proclaim your name, the Father's name, to my brothers.' He is proclaiming his name, the Father's name. The world is full of words. But the Son proclaims the Father's name, his nature and his character to us his brethren. Thus, as we listen to his Word and sing the Father's praise we join the Son in praising the Father: 'In the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise'. But the journey continues! In 2:13 he teaches us 'I will put my trust in him'. In this Jesus is saying, 'That is what I had to learn'. Though the Word became flesh, 'I had to learn every step along the way to put my trust in God my Father. When it came to temptation to turn the stones into bread, should I trust God my Father? When it came to the agony in Gethsemane, should I trust him? When I came to yield my spirit up, do I still trust my Father? When I hear that there is going to

be a harvest and all of the nations are going to be given to me, do I trust God to give me those things or do I get them by some other means by, for example, worshipping Satan? I have had to learn, in my human flesh, what it is to trust and I teach you that lesson too!

In the second part of 2:13, we read, 'Behold I, and the children God has given me'. I suggest that Jesus is saying here: 'As I stand in the midst of the congregation, as I teach them the name of the Father, as I teach them to trust in God I also, as it were, look to God and look to all of the angelic creatures around the throne and I say to all heaven and earth, "Look at this family, look at them. They were a worthless, dead and a sinful bunch, but they are now clean and holy and justified. They are adopted sons of God and I don't care who is looking. You can bring all of the angels of heaven, you can bring all of the demons of hell but I will stand in their midst because I am not ashamed to call them my brothers"'.

I am convinced that Jesus' statement that he is not ashamed to call us his brothers is one of the most comforting statements in the scriptures. To know where this human heart has been and what it has done and what it is capable of and to know that the Son of God is not ashamed to call me his brother – what amazing grace!

This idea of 'journey' is, therefore, woven through Hebrews. It comes up, too, in chapter 7. In the Old Testament, Israel was given guidance for worship, they had a priesthood to accompany them on the journey, a mediation between God and man. This priesthood is described in various places in Hebrews, but the main point of so describing it is to describe its limitations, to indicate why that priesthood was not finally sufficient to bring the people of God to their final resting place. There are many reasons that the writer gives. The old priests were sinners themselves. They had to offer a sacrifice for their own sins as well as for the sins of the people. The old priests died and there were great numbers of them. They were prevented by death from continuing. The sacrificial system with which they operated was never the final word. It was only the foretaste of what was yet to come. The lambs that they offered pointed to a great Lamb that was yet to come. The blood that was spilt pointed to greater blood that was yet to be spilt. As the writer describes the priesthood which is passing away, by comparison, he speaks of Jesus as the new priest.

This raises something of a problem because Jesus didn't come from the right family to be a priest. He came from the line of Judah. He came through David's line. He was not a Levite and according to the old system of priesthood he couldn't be a priest. And so the writer says, 'Well if you look in the Old Testament you'll find that there is more than one sort of priesthood'. He takes the readers all the way back to this curious figure of Melchisedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God. This Melchisedek was a priest long before any of the other priests were born. Moreover, the writer says, he was greater than them because all of the other priests were still bundled up in Abraham's loins. This is a quaint old way of speaking but it emphasizes that while they were not yet born, when Abraham meets Melchizedek he bows down and gives him a tenth of all. Thus, he argues, he must be greater than the priesthood that came afterwards. One of the great differences of Melchisedek's priesthood is

that he was a King-Priest. The priests who sacrificed in the temple and the tabernacle before that were not king-priests, but Melchisedek is very clearly the king of Salem, (later Jerusalem). He's a greater man even than the great man Abraham because Abraham bowed down to him. He embodies the office of both king and priest and he is thus set by God at the very dawn of recorded human history as a model, as a type, as a pattern of the great King-Priest who was to come.

There are, of course, certain differences between the two King-Priests. Firstly, the latter had a better sacrifice to offer. He didn't have to offer the blood of bulls and goats and other things which could not finally cleanse the conscience. When Christ came as the great King-Priest he offered himself, the spotless Lamb of God, and so that sacrifice was once and for all entirely effective for removing the sins of his people.

In 7:3 (rather curiously) the text refers to Melchizedek as without father without mother and without genealogy. There have been lots of speculations about this and many heretical groups in Christendom made fanciful statements about Melchizedek. However, I think the main point made here is that he just appears and when he appears it is as though he has no connections. He is a completely new entity in the world and he in some sense acts as a model for Christ – a completely new entity in the world. Never before had the Word become flesh. Never before had the perfect man dwelt among us as the great King-Priest over the creation. The priesthood of Christ is eternal. It's not prevented from continuing by death. In every way the writer looks at it, it is superior. We may know this well, but let me emphasize verse 25, where we read, 'He's able to save forever, or completely, or to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him since he always lives to make intercession for them'. Death has no power over him, and he is able to save his people because he always lives to make intercession for them. John Owen makes this comment: 'It is generally acknowledged that sinners could not be saved without the death of Christ, but that believers could not be saved without the life of Christ following is not so much considered.'

Thus, we are on a journey and on that journey we have a priest who ever lives to intercede for us. There is nothing imperfect about his work – the once for all sacrifice for sin. As we make our way, following the cloud of glory as it were, we do well to think back through our wilderness experiences. If we did not have Christ interceding for us where would we be? If we had to get there on the strength of our own prayers how far would we travel? He ever lives to make intercession for us, to guarantee that we will make it to the end.

It's really important to emphasize that Jesus is not interceding with some reluctant God who doesn't want to do good for us. I think particularly in Hebrews it is possible to get this picture because there is so much emphasis on the blood of the sacrifice and the propitiation and the shedding of blood and so forth; but I want to recall a few statements from the book of Hebrews that emphasize that the Father is the source of all that Christ has done and does. Thus, the Father speaks through the Son, the Father sees to it that the Son is heir of all things, the Son is the outshining of the glory of God – the exact representation of the Father's character. Thus, it is not as though we have got one God in Jesus Christ and another God in the Father. God speaks through the Son,

reveals himself through the Son, his glory shines out of the Son. As we continue forward from these themes that dominate the early chapters of the book, we discover that it is the Father who is bringing all his enemies to the feet of the Son in order that the Son may become heir of all things. We discover that God the Father has purposed that the Son would be the one to whom the whole of the creation is made subject. It is the Father who set forth Jesus by his grace to taste death for all men. The Father perfects the Son as the Saviour of his people. Through the Son he is intent on bringing many sons to glory and he appoints the Son as the Apostle and High Priest of our confession and the Son is made perfect for ever by the will of God the Father. Again, the Father causes, by his will, all of God's people to be sanctified through the offering of his Son and, like a true father, he disciplines us, his true sons, that we should share in his holiness. Finally, the Father raises up the Son through the blood of the eternal covenant and through the Son works that which is pleasing in his sight. Thus, we should banish forever the notion, even in Hebrews, that God the Son has to persuade a reluctant Father to accept us. Salvation is the work of the Triune God, but the Father is source of it all.

Consequently, Christ must be thought of as the enthroned Priest King asking what he will from the Father who always hears and grants his request. It's a wonderful picture. 'Having made purification for sins', we are told at the end of the first part of chapter 1, 'he sat down at the right hand of God of the majesty on high.' And that matches with the Old Testament background of God himself interceding for his people.

In a number of places in the Old Testament, particularly Isaiah 59:16 ff., God looks at his people and he sees the wicked oppressing them, the poor and the orphans and the widows have no one to defend them, evil is rampant in the land and idolatry is destroying all the relationships. He adds, 'There was no one to intercede.' In response we read, 'So I bare my own arm', says God 'and I intervened on their behalf, and I brought judgement to their enemies, and I cleansed the idols from their land and I have become a father to the fatherless and I have become a husband to the widow' . . . God himself intervenes, God himself intercedes! It is the same picture we get in Hebrews. There is no reluctance on God's part to receive us or to receive the prayers of his Son on our behalf. It is God interceding for us through Jesus.

But notice (and here I want to go back to a passage in Hebrews which talks about the priesthood), 4:14f. says, 'Therefore since we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession for we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathise with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace that we might receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.' Notice the 'therefore' at the beginning of verse 14. The writer has been talking about the word of God as sharp as a two-edged sword that pierces to the very depth. No creature is hidden from his sight and if we were to be exposed to the word of God we would see our own worthlessness and the holiness of God would undo us. However, God has set his High Priest in place on our behalf so that the sight of our sin that the word of God brings to light in us does not destroy us or drive us insane. And this great High Priest has passed

through the heavens to become the one who rules over all things. That is what we are taught here; but notice the way in which the author has identified Jesus as the Son of God. The writer to the Hebrews has taken a long time to identify the Son of God as being equal with God but here he makes this astounding statement that the one who is equal with God is no less than Jesus the man who walked among us. Jesus the Son of Man is also the Son of God in human flesh. He retains that human flesh even now in heaven. He is Jesus the Son of God as our High Priest, the mediator between God and man.

Now this has several consequences. First of all, the man Jesus is still at the right hand of God and he knows what it is like to be in the condition of this creation under the conditions of suffering and ultimately under the pain of death. He knows what it is like for us when we are passing through the darkest of our dark nights. He knows what it is like when we are faced with the very real prospect of death. He has not expunged that from his memory. The man Jesus is able to sympathise with us in heaven because he has come through and lived through every pain and torment that you could imagine the human heart would come through; testing and trials and suffering we could barely imagine impinged on him almost every moment of the day. He knows what it is like to come through and so he does not condemn us. When sometimes we are troubled or perplexed or the spectre of death looms large and we are a little bit reluctant, or when we have to learn to trust God in the middle of the darkness, he knows what it is like and he does not send us out of the classroom if we blot our copybook. He is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters. He knows what it is like to be betrayed by one of his closest associates and I daresay his closest friends. He knows what it is like to be on the receiving end of deceit and injustice and undeserved hostility and undeserved persecution. He knows what it is like to be condemned to death not for his own sins, but for the sins of others. He knows all of that in heaven and he stands with us now on the earth through his Spirit, proclaiming the Father's name to us.

But this Jesus is Son of God, raised above the heavens, passed through the heavens, ruling at the right hand of God, the one whom we know is always heard by his Father. He is the one who has unhindered and eternal access to his Father, whose prayers are always utterly and completely in line with the Father's will on our behalf. Compare this with the old covenant! You may have cried out to a priest. You could have gone to one of the Levitical priests and if they were good and godly they would be wise and able to teach you the law and sympathise with your weaknesses and they would be able to counsel you . . . but they could not do anything about it. They could not actually extract you or bring you through it. Even in our closest relationships, we have points beyond which we cannot go. We will come to the point, perhaps some have already been through it, where your husband or your wife will slip away from you in death. You can be with them and you can hold their hand and you can squeeze it at the very last moment . . . but you cannot go through it with them. At some point you are left alone. You are limited . . . but Jesus' high priesthood is not limited in that way. He is Jesus the Son of God who has passed through the heavens, who is exercising power and dominion over the finest and smallest

detail of our lives and who by the power of an indestructible life is not prevented from coming with us through the valley of the shadow of death. When all of us stay on the shore and watch our loved ones depart, Jesus Christ, the High Priest, the Son of God, has been through death to the other side and he is able to accompany them.

But let's come back to where we started. If you're on the journey you're going to know some very deep times of suffering, some hard times of perplexity. You need to know that Jesus Christ is your High Priest. You can't cry out ultimately to another human being. We can and we do, we are here to bear one another's burdens, but (in the ultimate sense of effectiveness) we cannot find our needs met in another mere human being. We need the God-man Jesus Christ to be a High Priest for us. We know from bitter experience, when we want someone to be good to us and they let us down how devastating that is. When we put our hopes in the basket of this one person and they betray us how devastating that is! But Jesus Christ, the great High Priest is faithful and true and will never betray us, and as we go through this journey and as the evil one seeks to attack us, as Satan demands permission to sift us like wheat, so the Son of God prays for us and, as we approach the gates of death with fear and trembling in our hearts, the Son of God prays for us. As we know the weakness and futility of our own words and our witness and we are full of fear every time we go to speak for him, the Son of God prays for us and when all of the evil hosts of hell gather round about to seek to destroy the work of the kingdom, the Son of God prays for us. When we are disowned by our very family and friends, when our loved ones betray us, when our husband runs off with someone else, when our wife – you know the story . . . the Son of God prays for us because if you had to come from the beginning to the end of this journey by yourself, beloved one, you couldn't make a step into the Father's plan. So the writer to the Hebrews says in 4:15, 'We do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathise with our weakness, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.'

Now I suspect that many of us for most of our lives live with enough security systems around us that we don't really need the Priesthood – well at least that is what we think. Often, when we come to points when we're tested and stretched, there is always something we can fall back on – there is another scheme with which we can come up. Some of us may have a second bank account when the first one runs out. Some of us might have another person upon whom we can call, another fall-back position . . . but when we have

got nothing and we know that we have nothing, then the High Priesthood of Jesus Christ really means something. When you think you can do something, the High Priesthood of Christ is almost irrelevant. But, my beloved friends, is there really, in reality, anything that we can do that does not necessitate the ministry of Jesus Christ our High Priest praying and interceding for us, intervening against our enemies.

Viewed from another angle we may suggest that he sustains all things with the word of his power. We cannot even breathe without him. Perhaps one of the greatest mercies that ever happens to us is to be stripped of our power and our potentialities. A friend of mine wrote a song which talks about the judgements from God which are judgements of mercy for us, where we learn in a new way that apart from Christ we have nothing, we are nothing, we can do nothing and apart from his priestly intercession all of our plans and schemes are worthless.

I want to close on this and ask you this really just very simply. Have you ever just really cried out to Christ? You know you don't have to hang back. He says, 'Let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace'. You're not going to be turned away when you cry out to him. When you cry out you'll find mercy for your sins, for your misery and you will find grace to help in time of need. I can guarantee you, by all the power of the testimony of the Spirit in his word, that when you cry out to Christ, he will hear you. Though all earthly friends disown and forsake you he will not. Though everything is stripped away from you he will not be taken away. He will not take himself away and there will come a time, perhaps sooner, perhaps later, when we will have no earthly strength left, where all our bank accounts and anything else will mean nothing. Within an inch of our life we'll be drawing our last breath. At that point, I suggest that the Priesthood of Christ will mean more to us than we could ever imagine. The great Shepherd-King knows his sheep and he calls us by name even through the valley of the darkness, to bring us to his Father's kingdom.

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