

June 14, 2015

Jesus Always Lives to Intercede

Hebrews 7:1 – 28

We've been looking at this letter to a group of 1st century urban Christians who are struggling in their faith. They're facing opposition and trials and suffering and discouragement. And the writer of Hebrews is encouraging his readers to persevere in trials, to endure under suffering, not to shrink back. The big question, the unasked but overshadowing problem the writer addresses in this book is: ***If God really loves us, if He is truly committed to His glory and our good, why are we suffering? Why is our life so hard?*** And he answers that question by reminding them of one simple fact – life is a journey through the wilderness. It's a journey from weariness into rest. It's a journey from alienation into the presence of God. It's a journey from isolation into the city of God. It's a journey through a wilderness where all your props are exposed and destroyed, and the only way you're going to get home is by fixing your eyes on Jesus.

This section of Hebrews is a continuation of what the writer left off with in chapter five when he broke it off in verse 10, to spend the next chapter and a half, to urge the believers to not be spiritually dull and apathetic Christians, but to press on and grow up to maturity in Christ and have their souls anchored in Heaven. Now he begins to finish his thoughts where he left off. And here he tells them that what they need is to know Jesus as their intercessor. He has talked about Jesus as the final word, that He's better than the prophets, or the angels or Moses; that He's our King, our Captain, our Brother and our great High Priest. He knows our weaknesses, He sympathizes with our struggles; He endured the unendurable and came through to victory. Therefore He is able to save. Keep looking to Him. And now here he talks about our need to see that Jesus always lives to intercede for us. So let's ask three questions here: Why do we need an intercessor? How does Jesus fit the bill? And how does that affect our lives?

First of all, why do we need an intercessor? Why is that a hopeful picture for us? This whole passage is built around the idea that we need someone to intercede for us and that Jesus is that someone. You see the writer ends the last section by saying, *We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.* And then he goes on to compare the priestly qualities of this mysterious Melchizedek and Jesus, in order to convince us that Jesus is the high priest we really need. In other words, the writer is talking as if it is taken for granted that everyone needs some kind of priest to intercede on their behalf. He assumes that we need a high priest to plead our case as it were. And that is not a thought that a lot of modern people have. 'Oh that might have been true back in those days when they were more superstitious and ignorant. But we don't need anyone today.'

But the trouble with that is the fact that even if we think that way, we don't live that way. Let me explain. The writer uses this term 'intercede' down in verse 25 – that Jesus always lives to intercede for us and that should give us great confidence and hope. But it can only do that if you recognize that you need someone interceding for you. And whether we consciously admit it or not, we need that. We need an intercessor. The word he uses is *entugchano*; and it means to appeal or to plead – to intercede for someone. In other words, he is saying, we need an advocate – someone who takes our side, pleads our case, someone who speaks for us. It has legal implications as well. It meant to appear in court as the representative of someone who was on trial.

Why do we need that? We need it because a lot of what we do in life is an attempt to make our own case; to validate our own existence, to somehow justify ourselves to ourselves. To validate our actions, our existence. **Validation.** What is it? Basically it's getting feedback from outside ourselves that I'm okay. Its a pronouncement that you are on my side, that what I do and say are acceptable. My efforts are appreciated. You see some good in me. I'm actually a better person than I think I am sometimes' We want approval. You see, we all walk around with an image of who we think we are in our heads, but really we don't know if we actually look like that to other people. You hope you do, but you don't really know. So we want validation. We need a pronouncement. We want approval, we want affirmation, and we somehow know that the only accurate estimate of our worth can come from someone outside and we want to find out what they think.

And the thing is, you can't not want to find out. On Oprah's final episode of her wildly popular TV show, she highlighted the importance of validation: ***'I've talked to nearly 30,000 people on this show,' she said, 'and all 30,000 had one thing in common. They all wanted validation.'*** I recently read where a social media guru said something to the effect of, there are two types of people involved in social media, those who want more followers and those who are lying about it. Validation. Much of our lives are spent seeking some kind of approval from others. We need people to affirm that we're good, capable, beings. We're smart, funny, and beautiful. We're hard-working, accepting, and athletic. In short, we need people to tell us we're awesome, we may be flawed, but overall we're pretty good.

Nothing sums this up like a character in Arthur Miller's play, *After the Fall*, a guy named Quentin: he says *'...for many years I looked at life like a case at law, a series of proofs. When you're young you prove how brave you are, or smart; then, what a good lover; then a good father; finally, how wise, or powerful, or what-the-hell-ever. But underlying it all, I see now, there was a presumption. That I was moving on an upward path toward some elevation, where—God knows what—I would be justified, or even condemned—a verdict anyway. I think now that my disaster really began when I looked up one day—and the bench was empty. No judge in sight. And all that remained was this endless argument with oneself—this pointless litigation of existence before an empty bench. Which, of course, is another way of saying—despair'*. Quentin in Arthur Miller's, *After the Fall*

What Arthur Miller is saying is that we all have a big problem; and that is that life is one long trial in which you are arguing and trying to prove to some judge on the bench that you are good rather than bad, you are lovable rather than unlovable. You're trying to prove yourself, and you cannot rest in your own evaluation. You have to get it from outside. Someone has to pronounce you. Someone has to validate you. You've got to get approval from the bench. You can't rest in your own estimation. But says Quentin, 'One day I looked up and the bench was empty – there was no one there to judge me.' In other words, he's saying there was no ultimate judge of whether or not I was brave or smart or a good father or lover or whatever. The bench is empty. There is no God so I shouldn't have to prove anything. But guess what? It didn't stop the litigation. It didn't stop the endless argument with himself. If there is no judge, the argument is pointless – the search for validation is meaningless. But that doesn't help because the argument continues.

And he's in despair because on the one hand he can't stop the litigation with himself, but on the other hand, who is there to impress? In a strange way, Arthur Miller understood what Paul tells us in Romans chapter one that everyone born under the sun knows that there is a God and that they are accountable to Him, but at the same time they reject Him. Everyone has a sense that life is a trial with the verdict sure to come in the end and we are desperate to know that the verdict will come down on our side. In our search for validation we're after verdicts. We're after pronouncements, recognition, praise, approval. We're looking for affirmation from outside, but underneath all that we're looking for affirmation from God, because we somehow know there really is an ultimate bench before which we're all litigating. One day we will all appear before the high court and the real question is ... ***Are you going to have to go into that court all by yourself?***

Anybody who has had any experience with the justice system will tell you that the guy who represents himself in court has a fool for a lawyer. That is just not a smart thing to do. We need someone with impeccable credentials, someone who knows the system and has favor with the judge to represent us. And the writer is telling us that is exactly who Jesus is. People who think they can appear before the ultimate judge as their own attorney, simply do not realize their real condition. This is not a court in which you want to try and persuade the judge that you really are a pretty good guy, in spite of a few things in your life that might seem rather sketchy. You can't go before this judge to argue that all in all you've lived a pretty good life, been a fairly decent father and husband, or mother and wife. You really were kind to animals and children even if you cheated on your taxes and hated your neighbor. No. What you need is a representative – someone to argue your case – someone who already has the favor of the judge. The writer here says that someone is Jesus.

Now we are not going to go through all the arguments the writer makes to prove that this someone is Jesus. But I'll try to sum it up briefly. He assumes first of all that we need a representative, a priest who can argue our case before the court – someone like Melchizedek. Someone who is a priest-king; someone who stands above the inherently ineffective priesthood of Aaron and Levi. The priesthood these Hebrews knew was ultimately not our best representation before the bench because they had to argue for themselves as well as the people; and they were mortal. You had to keep appointing new guys to the office.

The writer says that this priesthood couldn't solve the issue: *Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron?* In other words, the old priesthood is not good enough; we need a priest like Melchizedek to argue our case – one who looks like Jesus. Here's a guy who *is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever.* That's Jesus. The writer is not disavowing Scripture that says that Jesus had a mother and father. What he is pointing to is His qualification as the Son of God, not merely the Son of Man. It is His eternal nature that is in view. And so just as Melchizedek is said to be without father and mother as the type of Christ, the Son of God in His eternity has neither beginning nor ending. Therefore, He is the one you want to appear before the bench. The writer makes it clear down in verse 21: *but this one was made a priest with an oath by the one who said to Him: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, "You are a priest forever." This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant.*

Jesus is the one we need to represent us before the bench because He is the guarantor of a better covenant. He not only knows the law of this covenant inside and out, He's the one who put it in place. So the writer draws this conclusion: *Consequently, 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.* In other words, He can save those who come before the bench through Him. If He's your representative, you don't have to worry about the verdict. You know, when you come before the judge in a court of law, you don't come as yourself. If you do, you're probably not going to do well. You see, it is your intercessor's words and actions, it is his performance, not yours that will make or break you. Your representative in court is just that – your representative. Essentially he is you before the judge.

To be a Christian is not simply to have Jesus as your example and ask yourself 'What would Jesus do?' It is not to simply say, 'I try to live a moral life and love my neighbor as myself. I go to church, and I read my Bible and I pray'. That won't help you. That is to appear in court and be your own attorney, and that's a disaster. In fact, in real life, people on trial don't say a thing – their lawyer says it all for them. If they do try to speak for themselves they usually hang. Your intercessor is your substitute. In a very real sense, you are in him. Just like the Bible tells us that to be saved is to be in Christ. It is to be in union with him. It is only when we are in Christ that we are saved; it is only in Him that we are justified; it is only in Him that we are sons of God. It is to be in Him – to have Him as our substitute. That is what it means to have Him as our intercessor.

What does that look like? For a long time I thought that to have Jesus interceding for me simply meant that He was praying for me. And it does mean that, but there is so much more here. I had the idea that Jesus would come before the Father and pull out my file, 'Sandberg, Michael', shake His head a bit and then approach the bench. 'Father, we've got Sandberg here again and I know that you've heard this before but this is my job you know. I know he's promised to change and he's done pretty well, but now, he's done it again and I know it looks pretty bad. But I'm asking you, please Father, give him another chance. I think he'll make it through this time if you just give him another shot at it. Besides, you owe Me. I went to earth and did the cross thing, and here we are. I'm just asking for mercy one more time for my client here. Pretty please'.

And I always hoped that the Father would say, 'Well, okay, one more chance'. But I could never be sure. Because how long could I count on the Father being merciful? There's absolutely no reason the Father couldn't one day say, 'That's it. I've had it with Sandberg. It's too late. He's gone too far. He's a preacher for crying out loud'. I knew that God told Moses how it was. *'I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy'*. And I was afraid that one day there wouldn't be anymore mercy. You can't count on the judge having mercy. If you had an attorney who took your case to the judge and said, 'I know my client's guilty as sin, but I'm asking for mercy', you've already lost the fight. If you're throwing yourself on the mercy of the court, you don't have a case. But a good attorney has a case. And Jesus is a good attorney.

The reason Jesus is the intercessor we need is right there in the text: *For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for His own sins and then for those of the people, since He did this once for all when He offered up Himself.* What this means is that Jesus is not interceding for mercy, but for justice. He's saying, ' "Father, I know that you are a just God and you demand justice.'

'And I know that Sandberg here is guilty. There's no question of his guilt and he deserves to pay the penalty. But, Father, I already paid that penalty. I made a new covenant in My blood and it would be unjust for You to require two payments for the same debt. Therefore, because I've already made payment for this debt, I am not here asking for mercy for Sandberg, I am demanding justice. And Father, Your justice, Your very righteousness, demands that You embrace and accept him forever.' That's a case. That is not throwing yourself on the mercy of the court. That is an infallible case. This is what the apostle John writes in his first letter: *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* 1 John 1:9 John doesn't say He is faithful and merciful – he says He is faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us. That means that the one who is pleading your case before the bench lived the life you should have lived and died the death you should have died so that now the justice of God, not the mercy of God, demands your acceptance. The justice of God demands the not guilty verdict.

So we need an intercessor, and Jesus is the intercessor we need, how does that change the way we live our lives? What difference would knowing this and accepting this make in our lives? I suppose we could go on for quite a while listing the ways this would change us but I just want to focus on a few really key things. If you accept Jesus as your intercessor it means first of all that you begin to see yourself in a different light. The word of God tells us that whoever believes in Jesus becomes a new creation in Christ. What does that mean? What does that look like? The picture the writer gives us is Jesus as our high priest, interceding for us with the Father. If you go back to the description of the high priest in the Old Testament you see this incredible picture of the high priest of God decked out in a fabulously rich outfit. He was literally covered with gold and silver and precious stones – some commentators tell us that the net worth of the nation was in the ephod, the outer garment, he wore. There was gold and silver and rubies and emeralds and diamonds. He literally sparkled. He was beautiful.

And on his chest there were twelve large, beautiful, precious stones that represented the people of Israel before God. What this was saying was that when the Father looks at Jesus, what He sees is an absolute beauty. And because we are in Him, that's what we look like as well. We are a new creation in Christ. We have a new identity. We're precious in His sight. It doesn't matter what you were. It doesn't matter what you looked like before. It doesn't matter how badly you lived before. If you are in Jesus, you are a beauty to the Father. When the Father looks at us He sees Jesus. This goes beyond merely being forgiven or pardoned. Getting a new identity in Jesus will tear down the idea that you've been forgiven and now it's up to you to work hard to be worthy of this pardon. We are way too prone to accept the fact that we've been forgiven and then go on to think that we now have to work hard at maintaining this. We need to understand that Jesus is my beauty, He is my glory and He is my righteousness and worthiness, and in Him I'm not only forgiven, I'm a new creation and I'm beautiful in God's eyes.

Embracing Jesus as your intercessor also gives you courage. The enemy of our souls is always after us, telling us that we're failures as Christians, we'll never amount to much, we give in to temptation all the time, we're a poor excuse for a saint. What do you do when that happens? And I know it happens to you because it happens to me all the time. Does it help to start arguing your case before the bench? 'Well I haven't done too badly this week. I've been mostly good'. No. If you start arguing your own case you've already lost. What you need to do is let your representative speak for you. ***When Satan tempts me to despair and tells me of the guilt within; upward I look and see Him there, who made an end to all my sin. Because the sinless Savior died, my sinful soul is counted free. For God the just is satisfied to look on Him and pardon me.*** That is why we need to preach the gospel to our souls. Don't try to argue your case. Jesus has already done that for you. Read the verdict on your sin and guilt – rehearse the gospel to yourself. Rest in what your representative has already done for you.

In Acts chapter seven, there's a Christian named Stephen who is about to be executed by stoning and the text tells us that as they are about to execute him he suddenly looks up and sees something. His face was shining like an angel the writer says and his last words were 'Lord, don't hold this sin against them'. In other words, there was such joy at the moment he was being executed and such love that he was able to forgive them. What did he see? Do you know what he saw? The writer recorded his words, 'Behold I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God'. What he saw was his intercessor, his representative standing before the bench. At the moment this earthly court was condemning him, the only court that mattered was commending him.

Stephen didn't give a hoot for what the court down here was doing. He didn't care if they were killing him. He saw Jesus standing before the bench and that filled him with courage. *Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 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.* Romans 8:33-34

Knowing Jesus as your intercessor also infuses your life with confidence. The text tells us that *'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.'* In other words, He is praying for us. In Luke 22:31-32, Jesus is speaking to Peter, who had said on the night of the final Passover, *'Even if I must die with You, I will not deny You.'* And He said, *'Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail you, and when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.'* What is interesting and, I think, enlightening, was that He did not pray that Peter would be spared the temptation or even that he would be triumphant in it. What Jesus prayed was that his faith would not fail. And that is the issue for every Christian – that our faith would not fail, that we would endure and not fall away, that we would not be those who shrink back to destruction as it says later in Hebrews.

What this says is that nothing that comes our way is out of His control. He is never surprised; nothing escapes His notice; He is not a God of coincidence or accident; everything is intended for our good and His glory. And He's praying that way. And this is what He is praying for all those who are His: *'Father, don't let their faith fail, cause them to persevere in spite of the pressures of life and all the forces of hell arrayed against them, continue to draw them to Yourself and delight themselves in You, help them to overcome every defeat and turn every failure into a triumph of Your glory, don't let discouragement derail them, don't let bitterness turn their hearts away from You, comfort them in their suffering for My sake and bring all those who draw near to You through Me on to glory.'*

Finally, knowing Jesus as your intercessor suffuses your life with joy. Adverse circumstances don't drive you into depression. Critics aren't able to suck the life out of you. If you don't have this, when critics vent on you, you either get all indignant and say, 'How dare you judge me?' and get on your self-righteous high horse, or you're massively depressed. But when you know that Jesus is there pleading on your behalf you can look at these guys and say, 'You don't know the half of it. It's worse than you think!' You see, you don't have to act as your own lawyer – you have an intercessor. You can point to Jesus and say, 'He speaks for me. You want to criticize? Talk to Him.' On the one hand the gospel deals a death blow to our pride. We're such terrible sinners, how could we ever be proud? And on the other hand it deals with our feelings of inferiority. The God of the universe knows us to the bottom and loves us to the heavens. We are absolute beauties in the Father's sight, and He loves us absolutely; and His is the only opinion that matters. We don't have to worry about what other people say. The two things that rob us of joy are dealt with in the gospel: pride and self consciousness. Christianity doesn't make you think more of yourself or less of yourself; it makes you think of yourself less, which leaves room for joy.

The only way to have a lasting assurance of your worth and value is to know this Jesus as your intercessor. The only way to be able to live with courage and confidence and absolute joy is to embrace the gospel and quit trying to be your own attorney and let your representative in heaven speak for you. Jesus has an eternal priesthood, therefore He is able to save to the uttermost, He is able to save completely, those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them. This is what He does, He lives for this. This is His life to do this for us. Let Him speak for you today.

Our gracious Father in heaven,

We thank You this morning for Your great and precious promises that entice us to remain faithful and fill us with anticipation of Your coming and cause our hearts to overflow with hope. Your word promises that with You there is unfailing love and an overflowing supply of salvation; Your word promises that You will not let any who are Yours fall away; Your word says that all who are Yours have reserved for them in heaven a priceless inheritance and that in Your mighty power You will protect those who trust in You until they receive it. We thank you for Jesus who always lives to intercede for us. We pray that you would help us to apply to our lives, as we reflect on this image, all the benefits of it. We confess that we don't live as if this is true. We don't live with the confidence or courage or joy that is ours in Jesus. We pray that the word we have heard would sink deep into our souls and cause us to begin living in this new identity as sons and daughters forever beloved of the Father. As we come to the Table this morning, help us take these truths and make them part of our lives so would truly be a people who delight in God through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the powerful name of Jesus Christ our Savior, Amen.