

Sermon 93: Romans 8:34: Christ's Heavenly Session

The seating of Christ

The interceding of Christ

OUTLINE

When we think about Jesus work for us we tend to think of Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday. If we are very thoughtful we might want to include Jesus whole life as being lived for us in active obedience to make up a perfect human righteousness with which we are credited when we believe. However, our contemplation of Jesus working for us ends with the resurrection. This means that one of the most overlooked parts of biblical teaching is the work of Christ for us in His heavenly session. Perhaps this is the first time you have heard of this. What we are drawing our attention to is the Ascension of Christ, the Coronation of Christ and the intercession of Christ. We often speak of Christ in His humiliation but what about Christ in His exaltation? We speak of Christ as Prophet, Priest and King while He was here on earth, but what about Christ as Prophet, Priest and King even now in His exaltation? It is this neglected aspect of Christ's work that Paul draws our attention to in order to assure us of our salvation. We are the poorer for not considering Christ's ongoing work for us now in His heavenly session. Paul tells us that we should not only think upon Christ having died and resurrected for grounds for our assurance, but also to see Him as enthroned and interceding for us as well. Romans 8:33-34, 'Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died---more than that, who was raised---who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.' Notice the words, 'more than that' and then Paul refers to His resurrection, coronation and intercession for us, each part contributing to our salvation.

My experience of Paul's way of seeking to assure me of my salvation is feeling overwhelmed. Paul takes a sledgehammer to the peanut of doubt obliterating it with the superabounding grace and provision of God. He has been using questions as blows of the hammer. The first blow was God is for us who can be against us? Here he reminded us that there is no one stronger than God. Then he spoke about God's unchanging love proven by the immeasurable gift of God's Son to save us. Then He showed us the irreversible nature of God's verdict and the sufficient provision for our guilt in Christ's death and resurrection. As if that were not enough Paul adds the fact that Jesus is seated at the right hand of God and is presently interceding for us to this already water tight case. Lets look then at how Christ's being seated, and His interceding further bolster our assurance.

The seating of Christ

The first thing we should be considering as we come to these next actions of Christ which work for us is this question: how does Christ's ongoing work in His heavenly session harmonize with His finished work on the cross? Or, how do Jesus words, 'it is finished' square with this ongoing activity of Christ on our behalf? Firstly, we need to respond by saying that Jesus words of completion refer to all that was needed to suffer in order to

appease the wrath of God towards our sins. His words mark the end of His work of suffering for salvation but only beginning of His work of applying the salvation He has won.

Let me put it to you this way. Paul tells us in 1 Cor. 15 that if Jesus did not rise from the dead we would still be in our sins marking the necessity of the resurrection. Well, we need to continue to speak about the necessity of all that Christ has done for us. We have often emphasized that it was necessary that Jesus die, because the wages of sin is death. Last week we showed how the resurrection was essential to our salvation. Let me now emphasize the ascension in the way. Apart from the ascension of Christ we would not be saved! How you might ask? This is where the book of Hebrews opens up to us some of the details of Christ's heavenly session after He was taken up into heaven. The book of Hebrews reminds us that Jesus is the Great High Priest, the one to whom all the shadows pointed. And that just as the high priest went into the holy of holies in the earthly tabernacle, Hebrews tells us that Jesus went into the heavenly temple of which the earthly was a copy to offer the sacrifice of His blood. Hebrews 9:11-14, 'But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) 12 he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. 13 For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, 14 how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.' If Jesus had not ascended from the earth into heaven, if He had stayed to set up an earthly kingdom He would not have entered into the direct presence of God to offer the sacrifice of His life and our sins would still not have been covered. His death was the killing of the sacrifice but His ascent into heaven was the offering of the sacrifice to the Father. There was no new sacrifice, or suffering or death just the presentation of the one already made.

Now Paul in v34 skips this part out, but I need to mention it because the sitting down of the down relates directly to the offering of the sacrifice in the holy of holies in heaven. Jesus' resurrection from the dead proves that the offering of His life was acceptable. How do we know that Christ's offering in the presence of the Father was received? The fact that the High Priest sits down proves that His work for the offering of our sin was accepted and His work is done. The author of Hebrews makes this clear in 10:11-14, 'And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. 12 But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, 13 waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. 14 For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.' The priests had to offer many sacrifices and had no opportunity to sit down, the fact that Christ is seated proves the end of the work needed to perfect us, or justify us. His act of sitting is as significant as the words 'it is finished'.

The seating of Christ at the right hand of the rather is not only relevant to marking the end of Christ's priestly duties of offering, but they also indicate a new era in Christ's reign as

exalted King. This act of being seated at the right hand of Father indicates many significant realities. This action indicates the fulfilments of the promise to David that one of his sons would sit on David's throne whose reign would be eternal (2 Sam. 7:13); a king who would be given the nations as His inheritance (Ps. 2:8). This action also indicates the reheadshipping of the human race. Adam was given dominion over the earth at creation. It was Adam's job to subdue the earth for the glory of God and drive out the devil and all that resisted God's will. Adam failed, he lost his authority. However, the Second Adam, Christ came and He was obedient. He crushed the head of the serpent in His death, and now as a reward for His obedience He has been given all authority on heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18-20), and He has been given the name that is above all other names (Phil. 2:9-11). It marks the end of the old age and the beginning of the new. It is now out of His war booty that Christ bestows gifts upon His church until all His enemies are made His footstool. His kingdom has been inaugurated but has yet to be consummated.

This seating of Christ at the right hand of the Father is one of the most immense watershed moments in redemptive history. Time will not allow us to see the gargantuan ramifications of this event, but here are a few that relate to the security of our salvation. Firstly, as we have shown, Jesus sitting down indicates that the work of offering is done and now those being saved can be justified. Secondly, the very fact that Jesus has been given this name above all names as a reward upon the successful completion of His obedience. This indicates to us that all is complete, there is nothing lacking in the work that He accomplished for us. Thirdly, Ephesians 2:6 tells us that on account of our union with Christ by the Spirit we are seated with Christ in the heavenly places, 'and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.' Can Christ ever be removed from His throne? Can Christ's throne be shaken by any power? Friends our salvation is as secure as Christ's throne for are seated with Him in the heavenlies.

The interceding of Christ

This however is not all that Paul wants to draw our attention to, he also mentions the fact that Jesus is now at this time interceding for us. The idea that Jesus is now presently interceding for us is one of great comfort but one that has also brought some misunderstanding. For example, because Jesus is called an advocate in 1 John 2:1, "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." On account of this we think of Jesus as a type of defence lawyer and the devil as a type of prosecutor. We have heard many sermons where the courtroom scene is laid out and the devil raises an accusation and it is Christ who answers by dying in our place. This scene is imaginary and helpful to illustrate various truths. However, we must not think that right now in heaven every sin of every Christian is being brought in accusation before God's throne and every sin of every Christian being answered by Christ's defence. We have already shown that the devil has been cast out of heaven, out of the courtroom as it were because Christ has made His offering for sin, perfecting forever those who are being sanctified, having silenced the devil's accusations in one blow by one offering forever. As we ponder Christ's present intercession we can think of Him as representing and praying for us.

Firstly, we should think of Christ's bodily presence in heaven at the right hand of the Father as interceding for us by representing us before the Father. The role of high priest as a representative is a well known one to anyone who is familiar with the OT. In the OT you had the high priest, an individual, representing the whole nation. On his shoulders he would have 2 onyx stones known as the stones of remembrance, from these a chest piece was hung with 12 stones, one for each of the 12 tribes of Israel. The high priest acted on Israel's behalf as their representative. Likewise Christ represents His church before the Father. God could be with the people, in their midst because of the ministry of the high priest. However, the argument of Hebrews is that Christ is a better high priest in every way. Aaron had to offer sacrifices for his own sins, Christ did not. Aaron could only offer the blood of animals which cannot remove sin, Christ offered a perfect human life. Aaron died and had to be replaced, Christ lives forever. Aaron's sacrifices needed to be repeated year after year, Christ was offered once for all time. Aaron was an imperfect human being who could only ever represent us imperfectly, but not Christ. Aaron represented Israel symbolically in stones and dress. Christ identified Himself with us by becoming flesh, and by uniting us to Himself in salvation by His Spirit. So His representation of us before the Father in heaven is perfect. This is the way that Phillip Hughes puts it, regarding what the believer needs to stand before a holy God he says, "He needs a holiness not his own, made available to him by the Lamb of God who has made atonement for his sins and who interposes Himself as his representative in the heavenly sanctuary. And this is the representation which Christ fulfils as He appears in the presence of God for us." In other words, Christ as He is right now, as our representative, He is your holiness. Whenever God wants to look upon your holiness, He does not look upon the incomplete, unfinished work of our sanctification. He looks at His perfect Son who is seated at His right hand as our representative.

It was this very thought that John Bunyan marks as what his faith clung to when he was converted. Writing about his conversion he says, "One day as I was passing into the field . . . this sentence fell upon my soul. Thy righteousness is in heaven. And methought, withal, I saw with the eyes of my soul Jesus Christ at God's right hand; there, I say, was my righteousness; so that wherever I was, or whatever I was doing, God could not say of me, he wants [=lacks] my righteousness, for that was just before him. I also saw, moreover, that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness worse, for my righteousness was Jesus Christ himself, "The same yesterday, today, and forever." Heb. 13:8. Now did my chains fall off my legs indeed. I was loosed from my afflictions and irons; my temptations also fled away; so that from that time those dreadful scriptures of God [about the unforgivable sin] left off to trouble me; now went I also home rejoicing for the grace and love of God." (Piper). So you are always represented before the Father, but not in yourself, but in Christ. And in Christ you are represented to God not in your sins, nor in your imperfect sanctification but represented by the person of Christ who has died to pay your sin debt, but brings to the table more than a mere perfect human death. He also lived a perfect life of obedience, and is perfectly righteous. This is the significance of Christ's ongoing presence in heaven. No one can kill Him, no one can pull Him down, no one can change His righteousness. And we are hidden in Him.

There is no new suffering that Christ does in heaven. There is no more blood that He offers. Every time we sin He does not squeeze another drop of blood onto an altar in heaven to pay for it. The payment for our sins is complete, no more suffering or payment needs to be made. His physical presence before the Father as our representative puts His perfection forward perpetually in our place instead of our sins.

Secondly, we need to realise that Jesus is praying for us. Paul's use of the word intercession in Romans 8 has the primary meaning of prayer, regarding the Holy Spirit who intercedes for us, Paul uses the word 'intercede', and 'prayer', interchangeably. Romans 8:26-27 (ESV) "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. [27] And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." The wrong picture to have in your mind is the Son begging an unwilling Father. No the Father has appointed the priesthood of Christ, He has ordered that all things should be done in response to His perfect asking, and that based on His perfection any answer should be given. The prayers of Christ are not new offerings, but rather requests based on His cross work. God has appointed it that not only should Christ secure the Church's blessing by His priestly work of dying, but that the application of the benefits of that work should be given in response to Christ's asking. It is accomplished through the priestly dying of Christ, and applied by the priestly asking of Christ. Picturing how the mechanics of this all works out is very difficult. But here is a picture. Please do not take this picture literally it is simply an attempt to illustrate a possible construction. The Father is seated on His throne, and the Son beside Him. Both are at rest, there is no frantic anxiety of a military consultation room with surprised and worried faces, pondering what possible response they could make to the devil's latest trick. Picture the events leading up to Pentecost. Both are seated, they turn to look at each other, both are in perfect harmony with each other, the Son stands and asks for the promised Holy Spirit to be sent to the Church, and the Father gladly gives. This was something Christ's death already secured, not some new aspect of His work that He has to work for. An out working of the already accomplished redemption, not a new work. But Christ is still a priest, and continues to function in that capacity even now as the mediator between God and men (1 Tim 2:5).

Hebrews draws to our attention the human sympathy our mediator has. Hebrews 4:14-16 (ESV) "Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. [15] For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. [16] Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." The primary applications have to do with two areas, temptation and prayer. Picture it, here is a Church that is facing persecution. They have to pay a high cost in terms of social ostracism, and possibly death, if they abandon the faith of their childhood and families, Judaism. Many are facing severe trials from family, loss of business, and threats of death. How does the author of Hebrews encourage them. By reminding them of Jesus our very human yet perfect High Priest. He is in sympathy with our weaknesses. He knows how hard it is to face these trials, he has felt our pains. We do not approach God through a mediator that

does not care for us, who has His own cares and concerns, who is unable to bear the whole Churches concerns upon His own shoulders. He is sympathetic, and will render His services as a mediator with compassion and dedication. As we pray in Jesus name we approach the throne of grace with Him at our side. All our prayers pass through His hands as it were to the Father. They all come to Him from a mediator who stands between us and God who is sympathetic and earnest for our sakes. He will be heard and we are assured that we will receive the grace we need from God because of the dedication of our highpriest with our case. Our confidence is in His interest in us, and with His acceptance with the Father. We have no doubt that God delights in Him, and we should have no doubt that He knows and cares for us in our trials.

In all my seeking to understand the role of Jesus in heaven I have realised that it is basically impossible to give a minute by minute commentary of what Jesus is doing. There are too many issues that would need to be factored in. Does Jesus have to open His mouth in asking, or is there a type of telepathy that goes on in heaven? Does He pray for individuals, or for the church collectively? We have already mentioned how the courtroom scene is an unlikely scenario. So in wrapping up let me highlight the parts Christ plays, but without committing us to any particular sequence of events or actions. All you need to know from the teaching of what Jesus is presently doing as priest in heaven is, firstly, your sins are totally taken care of, yes your ongoing ones. He is an ever living testimony to their full payment. Secondly, He is your righteousness. This means your confidence before God is not on the measure of your sanctification but on His ever present righteousness before the Father. Thirdly, He is praying for the Church. How, what does He say, does He pray for all by name? These are irrelevant questions to the point that He prays, He prays with a vested interest in us, so goodbye Mary, and He is always heard and never denied. Fourthly, all blessing we receive from God we receive due to Christ's ongoing application of His finished work. We continue to benefit from His priestly role as intercessor, but he no longer acts as sacrifice, that was done once and for all time. John Owen rightly states the point that many would agree that we would not be saved if Jesus had not died, but few would think that our salvation would not be possible apart from His ongoing role as mediator, procuring the promised blessings of His finished work. And we need to be confident that all that is needed for our salvation continues to rest in His hands not ours, and He will perfectly finish all that is needed to bring His Church safely to heaven.

Let me finish with one final reflection to try and pull all of this together. Remember Stephen being stoned. He looked up and saw Jesus. Acts 7:55-56 (ESV) But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. [56] And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." What is the significance of Jesus standing? Is He standing to honour and receive the first martyr? Is He standing before the Father, because Stephen is standing in faithful witness before men? Let me suggest that Jesus is standing, and not sitting, not to add some new work to the finished cross work of Christ, but to act as mediator on Stephen and the Churches behalf. In Stephen's hour of need, Jesus is praying. When the Church is just about to suffer persecution and all will be scattered. Just as Jesus did for the disciples just before they were scattered when He was arrested, Jesus was praying. He will be heard, He will be answered. All that will happen is due to His ongoing

effective intercession. He gets the glory for all. We will have to wait for heaven to reveal all the details, but for now all you need to know is that the back up is there, and it cannot fail. Now we can see something of why Paul appeals to Christ's sitting at the right hand of the Father and His intercession as grounds for our assurance.