

A Faithful High Priest: The Unity of the Work of Christ's Priesthood

Selected Scriptures

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Introduction

Well, I know that some of you may have thought that my last sermon, back in May, was the final in our series on the atonement, but that is not so. There is yet more to say, more to study, more to consider and meditate upon concerning the perfect work of redemption that Christ our Savior has accomplished on our behalf.

And that, of course, has been the title of our series—*O Perfect Redemption!* And in it, I've sought to present to you Scripture's answer to the controversial question: "For whom did Christ die?" And as I've said a number of times before, we seek to answer this question of the extent of the atonement not merely for controversy's sake, or because we're overly infatuated with arcane, theoretical points of doctrine, but because the extent of the atonement is inextricably linked to the design and nature of the atonement—to the Gospel itself. We've seen that to whom the atonement extends is a function of what the atonement *is*, and what the Triune God *intended* to accomplish by the work of Christ on the cross. And those are matters of Gospel significance. The doctrine of the extent of the atonement is intensely practical, because it concerns the character of our God—as the One who is absolutely sovereign, whose saving purposes can never be thwarted—and it concerns the virtue of Christ our Savior—as the One who perfectly succeeds in accomplishing the salvation of His people. Not exactly marginal issues in the Christian life!

And unfortunately, multitudes of Christians have been taught a doctrine of the extent of the atonement that strikes at the heart of those very realities. A universal atonement—an atonement in which Christ dies in the place all people without exception, even those who are not finally saved—undermines the sovereignty of God. It suggests that He *would* save all people *if He could*—that He sent Christ to die so that everyone would have the possibility to be saved, if they only believe—but that unbelievers' rejection of Christ thwarts the Father's designs to save them.

But early on in our series we learned that the intention of God in the atonement was not to make sinners savable or to make salvation possible. First Timothy 1:15 says that "that Christ Jesus came into the world"—which means that the Father sent Christ Jesus into the world—"to *save* sinners." And so if (a) God's always sovereignly accomplishes His intentions, and if (b) His intention for the atonement was not to make provisions or possibilities but actually to save, then (c) all those for whom Christ died must certainly be saved. And since not all are saved, we found

that Christ's atonement is particular, and not universal. We cannot consistently hold to a universal atonement without making God out to be a failed Savior—almighty God powerless before the sovereignty of the will of mere mortals.

Not only does a universal atonement strike at the sovereignty and wisdom of God. It also undermines the efficacy and the value of the blood of Christ. It suggests that there are some whom Christ died to save who fail to come into possession of salvation! that the precious blood of the God-man was insufficient to satisfy the wrath of God in the case of the many sinners who perish eternally for their sins! When you universalize the extent of the atonement, without universalizing the extent of salvation itself and saying that it brings everybody to heaven, you empty the atonement of its inherent power to save. And you make the real, decisive, determinative cause of salvation something other than Christ and Him crucified. A. A. Hodge put it this way: "If the differentiating grace which distinguishes the believer from the unbeliever is to be attributed to any cause [other than] Christ's redemption, then that cause, and not his redemption, is the cause of salvation" (*The Atonement*, 403).

Consider how this devalues the blood of Christ, by suggesting that some for whom He shed His blood could remain lost forever. John Owen has a heart-wrenching paragraph about this in his book, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, and I happened to come across it again this week. He writes, "If Christ did so buy them, and lay out the price of His precious blood for them, and then at last deny that He ever knew them, might they not well reply, 'Ah, Lord! was not Your soul heavy unto death for our sakes? Did You not for us undergo that wrath that made You sweat drops of blood? Did You not bathe Yourself in Your own blood, that our blood might be spared? Did You not sanctify Yourself to be an offering for us as [much] as for any of Your apostles? Was not Your precious blood—by stripes, by sweat, by nails, by thorns, by spear—poured out for us? Did You not remember us when You hung upon the cross? And now do You say, You never knew us? Good Lord, though we be unworthy sinners, yet Your own blood does not deserved to be despised. Why is it that none can lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? Is it not because You die for them [Romans 8]? And did You not do the same for us [according to a universal atonement]? Why, then, are we thus charged, thus rejected? Could not Your blood satisfy Your Father, but we ourselves must be punished? Could not justice content itself with that sacrifice...?" (291).

And we saw that as we considered what Scripture teaches about the nature of the atonement. And we found that in every way that Scripture speaks of Christ's atoning death—as an expiatory sacrifice that takes away sins, as a propitiation that satisfies God's wrath, as a reconciliation, a redemption, and, most fundamentally, as a penal substitution—in every way that the Bible talks about the atonement, it insists on the fact that it perfectly accomplishes everything it set out to do, and that it was accomplished on behalf of particular individuals whom God has chosen to save, and not on behalf of all without exception. Expiation, propitiation, reconciliation,

redemption, and substitution are all inherently efficacious and particular. And that means that none for whom Christ has accomplished these things can fail to be saved. The efficacy of the atonement implies the particularity of the atonement. And so a perfect redemption must be a particular redemption.

Christ as Priest

But there's another aspect of the nature of the atonement that offers a significant argument for a particular redemption. And it is, frankly, one of the most overlooked topics in the debate over the extent of the atonement. And that is: the high priestly ministry of Christ. We tend not to think about the atoning work of Christ in the context of His priesthood. But Scripture presents them as inextricably linked! In fact, the Scottish preacher Hugh Martin wrote of this subject, "If [you propose] to investigate the scriptural doctrine of the atonement of Christ, . . . we must demand, as essential to the [state of the question], that it be set forth . . . within the category of his priesthood" (*Atonement*, 32). There simply is no atonement divorced from the priesthood of Christ.

And that is a key theme of the Book of Hebrews, whose author frequently speaks of Christ as the great High Priest of His people. In Hebrews 2:17, the author identifies Christ as "a merciful and faithful *high priest* in things pertaining to God, to *make propitiation* for the sins of the people." So the atoning work of propitiation is set in the context of His being a merciful and faithful high priest. Chapter 3 verse 1 calls Him "the Apostle and *High Priest* of our confession." Chapter 4 verse 14 says that in Christ "we have a great *high priest* who has passed through the heavens," and, verse 15, who "sympathizes with our weaknesses." We learn in chapter 5 that Christ did not seize this priestly office to Himself, but that, verse 10, He was "designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek." And so Jesus is not a priest of the order of Aaron. He is not a Levite. With a change of covenant there is a change of priesthood, chapter 7 verse 12. And so Jesus fulfills the Levitical priesthood, by functioning according to the order of Melchizedek rather than Levi. This is a priesthood that Christ holds permanently, Hebrews 7:24, because, verse 25, "He always lives to make intercession" for His people. Chapter 8 verse 1: The church has "such a high priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens." Chapter 9, verses 11 and 12 say that He "appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, [and] entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle . . . through His own blood."

And so, to consider the extent of the atonement apart from Christ's New Covenant priesthood is to take the extent of the atonement out of context, as it were. The work of mediation that Christ accomplished can never be divorced from—indeed, it can only be understood in light of—His identity as mediator. And in particular, what you find is that from the very inception of the concept of priesthood—even in the Old Testament—the twofold priestly work of (a) **sacrifice** and (b) **intercession** are so inextricably linked that their objects are **coextensive**. That is to say, a

priest, by definition, never fails to intercede on behalf of those for whom he has offered sacrifice. Neither does a priest intercede for those for whom he has not offered.

Now, where this has bearing on the discussion of the extent of the atonement is: Scripture teaches that same is true for Christ, the high priest of the New Covenant. He offers Himself as sacrifice for the very same number for whom He intercedes before the Father. And Scripture explicitly limits the scope of Christ's priestly intercession to be particular, rather than universal. And so: if (a) Christ offers sacrifice for the very same number for whom He intercedes, and if (b) He does not intercede for all without exception, but only for His people, then (c) His atoning sacrifice is not for all without exception, but only for His people. That's the argument for this morning. My aim with the rest of our time is to prove to you that that line of argument is biblical.

And to get there, we'll divide our sermon into **three parts**. First, we need to consider **the nature of the Old Covenant priesthood**. Second, we'll consider **the nature of Christ's New Covenant priesthood**. And then third, we'll vindicate the conclusions we draw from those observations against **a key objection** that is often raised against them. So: the Old Covenant priesthood, the Christ's New Covenant Priesthood, and a response to an important objection.

I. The Old Covenant Priesthood

First, let's consider **the Old Covenant priesthood**, and what the work of those priests has to teach us about the nature of atonement. We've already been introduced to how the Book of Hebrews identifies Christ as the great high priest of His people—the mediator of the New Covenant. Hebrews 12:24 calls Him “Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.” And Hebrews 8:6 says that He is “the mediator of a better covenant” than the Old Covenant, because the New Covenant “has been enacted on better promises.” And so by using this language—as well as the imagery of His offering Himself as a priestly sacrifice, entering through a greater tabernacle to sprinkle His own blood on the altar, and so on—the New Testament identifies Christ as the antitype and fulfillment of all the Levitical priesthood and sacrificial system looked forward to. It borrows the conceptual framework of Old Covenant priestly ministry, and therefore makes it foundational for understanding the atoning work of Christ.

Now, of course there isn't a one-to-one correspondence between the two. We already mentioned that the Levitical priests were “designated according to the order of Aaron,” as Hebrews 7:11 says, while Jesus is a priest “according to the order of Melchizedek.” And so we ought to expect some discontinuity between the two orders. But, except for where those discontinuities are explicitly noted in the text—the old priests stand daily, never ceasing to sacrifice; while Christ offered once for all and sat down)—except where those differences are named, it's right to see a basic continuity between the high priesthood of the Old Covenant and Christ's high priesthood in

the New Covenant. And so that means it has much to teach us about atonement in general, as well as Christ's atonement in particular.

Now, what is a priest? What is the fundamental duty of a high priest under the Old Covenant. Hebrews 5:1 tells us plainly. It says, "For every high priest taken from among men is appointed on behalf of men in things pertaining to God,"—that is to say, to represent sinners before God—"in order to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins"—which means that the *way* in which the priest represents the people to God is to offer sacrifices to God for their sins. But the high priest's duty of offering sacrifices was not limited to simply slaying the animal. In fact, his work was not complete until he had sprinkled the blood of the sacrificial animal on the altar in the tabernacle. And so, as I said earlier, the function of the high priest was twofold. It was both **sacrifice** and **intercession**—both slaying and sprinkling.

And we see that throughout the opening seven chapters of Leviticus, which detail the laws for the various sacrifices Israel was to offer through the mediation of the priests. The law prescribes both sacrifice and intercession. For example, in Leviticus chapter 1 and verse 5, "He shall [a] slay the young bull before Yahweh, and Aaron's sons the priests shall offer up the blood and [b] sprinkle the blood around on the altar that it is at the doorway of the tent of meeting." You see the same thing in verse 11: "He shall [a] slay it on the side of the altar . . . and Aaron's sons the priests shall [b] sprinkle its blood around the altar." And again in chapter 3 verse 2: "He shall lay his hand on the head of his offering and [a] slay it at the door way of the tent of meeting, and Aaron's sons the priests shall [b] sprinkle the blood around on the altar." And over and over again: chapters 3, 4, 5, 7, even 17: sacrifice and intercession; slaying and sprinkling.

You also see this in Leviticus 16 concerning the Day of the Atonement—the yearly pinnacle of the sacrificial system. And you'll remember that that involved two substitutionary goats—the scapegoat, and the goat of sacrifice. And what concerns us at the moment is the goat of sacrifice. Leviticus 16:9 says the high priest was to slay the goat as a sacrifice for the sins of the people. But, the sacrificial death wasn't the end of the priest's work. Look at verse 15: "Then he shall slaughter the goat of the sin offering which is for the people, and bring its blood inside the veil and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, and sprinkle it on the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat." So it is this twofold work—both the slaughter of the goat and the intercessory sprinkling of its blood—that accomplished atonement for Israel's sins.

Now, what we take away from this is: the two functions of priestly sacrifice and intercession are inextricably linked. The offering of the sacrificial animal on the bronze altar outside the tabernacle was **inseparable** from the application of the animal's blood upon the golden altar of incense. The same priest brought the same blood from the altar of sacrifice to the altar of intercession! And more than that: we're told in Leviticus 16:13 that Aaron was to burn incense while he was in the holy of holies, so that a cloud of smoke would cover the mercy seat. And

verse twelve says that the fire that would ignite that incense was to come from “coals of fire from upon the altar before Yahweh,” which were to be brought into the holy of holies from outside. Do you see what the text is saying? Aaron the priest took hot coals from the altar where the sacrificial animal was burned and used those very coals to start the fire of intercessory incense (Niemi, 65).

Sacrifice and intercession are inextricably linked.! They are distinct functions, but they are inseparable functions as the priest makes atonement for the sins of the people. They are two sides of the same atoning coin. It could never be the case that a priest would offer a sacrifice on behalf of one sinner, and then fail to intercede for that worshiper by sprinkling the blood of the sacrifice upon the altar. That would be to abandon the work of the priesthood. John Owen comments, “To offer and to intercede, to sacrifice and to pray, are both acts of the same [priestly] office, and both [are] required in him who is a priest; so that if he omit either of these, he cannot be a faithful priest for them: if either he does not offer for them, or not intercede for the success of his [sacrifice] on their behalf, he is [deficient] in the discharge of his office” (*Death of Death*, 183).

Now, a necessary implication of that inseparability of sacrifice and intercession is that these two functions are **coextensive**. The scope of the priest’s sacrifice is identical to the scope of his intercession. On the Day of Atonement, the people for whom the high priest would slay the goat *are* the people for whom he would sprinkle the blood of the goat. It is not the case that the high priest would, say, sacrifice the goat as a provisional atonement for the sins of everyone throughout the entire Gentile world, and then only intercede with the sprinkling of blood on behalf of Israel alone. No, the scope of the intercession was identical to and grounded in the scope of the sacrifice. The high priest offered for everyone for whom he would intercede, and he interceded for everyone for whom he offered.

And so we learn from considering **the Old Covenant priesthood**, that the priestly work was twofold: the work of sacrifice, and the work of intercession. We learn that those functions are so inextricably linked as to be inseparable. And we learn that they are coextensive.

II. Christ’s New Covenant Priesthood

That brings us, in the second place, to consider **Christ’s New Covenant priesthood**. And we find these very same truths to mark the New Testament’s teaching concerning the priesthood of Christ.

We see that same twofold priestly function in the ministry of Christ. As the great high priest of the New Covenant, Jesus, Hebrews 9:14 says, “through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God”! This high priest was both *offerer* and *offering*. He doesn’t need to multiply sacrifices day after day, Hebrews 7:27, “because this He did once for all when He offered up

Himself” when He willingly laid down His life “to bear the sins of many” (Heb 9:26). But in addition to offering Himself as **sacrifice**, our great high priest also rose from the grave, “has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens” (Heb 8:1), and entered into the heavenly tabernacle where “He always lives to make **intercession**” (Heb 7:25) for His people. Hebrews 9:24 says, “For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf” (ESV).

Just as the high priest of the Old Covenant would appear in the presence of God in the holy of holies to sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice on the altar, so also Christ our great high priest entered into the presence of God in the heavenly tabernacle to present His own blood before the Father (Heb 9:11–12). And what is He doing there? He is pleading, as an advocate for His people, the infinite merits of His perfect sacrifice; answering every accusation that our enemy brings against us on account of our indwelling sin with the wounds in His hands and side; and praying to ensure that all the blessings He has purchased by His death should in due time be effectually applied to everyone for whom He purchased them. Romans 8:34: “Christ Jesus is He who *died*, yes, rather who was *raised*, who is at the right hand of God, who also *intercedes* for us.”

And not only do we find that twofold function evident in Christ’s priestly ministry. We also find that same intimate link—that **inseparable** connection—between Christ’s sacrifice and His intercession. For example, in Hebrews 9:12, we read that “through His own blood, [Christ] entered the holy place once for all, *having obtained* eternal redemption.” It is on the basis of having already *obtained* eternal redemption through His own blood shed in His death that Jesus may enter into the heavenly sanctuary to intercede for His people. It is on the basis of having “offered Himself without blemish to God” (to use the language of verse 14) that He can appear in the presence of God to secure the effectual cleansing of believers’ *consciences* from dead works to serve the living God. Just as it is with the high priest of Israel, the Messiah’s blood shed as a sacrifice is the very same blood brought into the heavenly tabernacle for intercession. And that means the same thing in the New Covenant as it did in the Old: the scope of both actions is **coextensive**. Just like the Old Testament priests, Christ intercedes for everyone for whom He died, and He died for everyone for whom He intercedes.

A second text that shows that connection is 1 John 2:1–2. The Apostle John is writing to the churches of Asia Minor to warn them against false teaching and to exhort them to make war with their sin and put it to death. But, in the case that these believers do sin, John tells them not to despair, because, verse 1: “if anyone sins, *we have an Advocate* with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” Though your life may furnish evidence against you, and though Satan himself will as it were hurl accusations of unrighteousness against you in the court of heaven, yet you have an

Advocate, whose blood cries louder than the enemy's accusations against you, and who ensures that your faith will not fail. What does Jesus say to Peter? Luke 22:31: "Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; *but I have prayed for you*, that your faith may not fail; and you, *when* once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." Jesus' prayers for His own are effectual! And His prayers cry louder in the ears of the Father than your sins or Satan's accusations! Robert Murray M'Cheyne famously said, "If I could hear Christ praying for me in the next room, I would not fear a million enemies. Yet distance makes no difference. He is praying for me."

But on what basis, though, does our Advocate engage in His heavenly intercession? Why do His prayers cry louder than our sins? Verse 2 explains: "And He Himself is the *propitiation* for our sins." You see, it is because Christ has effectually turned away the wrath of God from us once for all by His substitutionary sacrifice on the cross that His advocacy with the Father on our behalf is so sure! Sinning believer, you need not despair of your salvation, because the Advocate who pleads for you before the Father in heaven is He who has accomplished a perfect redemption on your behalf, having extinguished in Himself the wrath against the very sins you will commit this afternoon! Do you see? The **intercession** of Christ is grounded in, and flows out organically from, the **sacrifice** of Christ. They are inextricably linked! Christ intercedes for everyone for whom He is a propitiation, and He is a propitiation for everyone for whom He intercedes.

One other text: Romans chapter 8. In Romans 8:28–39, Paul discusses redemption from beginning to end. In verse 29, he references the Father's election in eternity past: "For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined." In verses 34, he speaks of the death and resurrection of Christ: "Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather, who was raised." In verse 33 he talks about justification: "God is the one who justifies." And in verses 35 to 39 he talks about how nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ, which is essentially saying that the believer will persevere through sanctification unto glorification. So we've got the whole gamut of salvation here. And the question of assurance is in the foreground, because Paul asks in verse 31, "If God is for us, who is against us?" And verse 33: "Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns?"

But the question is, again: On what basis can believers be assured that nothing will separate us from the love of Christ? The answer is in verse 34: "Christ Jesus is He who *died*, yes, rather, who was *raised*, who is at the right hand of God, who also *intercedes* for us." Note how Paul coordinates the death, resurrection, and present intercession of Christ: "Died, raised, intercedes." Each one of those are functions of the unified priestly work of Jesus, which means that all three must be performed for the very same number as the others.

And more than that: “who also intercedes *for us*.” Who are the “us” for whom Christ intercedes? Well, they’re the same “us” in verse 32, where Paul says, “He who did not spare His own Son, but *delivered Him over for us all*, how will He not also with Him freely give *us* all things?” So this is key: those for whom Christ presently intercedes are the ones for whom the Father gave Christ over to death. And it could never be that the Father would give us the greater gift of His own beloved Son—especially seeing all that His precious Son had to suffer in order to win our salvation—only to fail to give us the lesser gifts of all that the Son purchased for us. It could never be that Christ would do the greater work in laying down His life for us—winning all the blessings of our redemption by enduring the agonies of divine wrath in His own soul—only to fail to do the lesser work of interceding on our behalf, ensuring that we come to lay hold of all the blessings He purchased for us.

And so here again, you see the **inseparable unity** between and **co-extensiveness** of Christ’s priestly work of offering and His priestly work of intercession. He intercedes for everyone for whom He died, and He died for everyone for whom he intercedes. He would never refuse to pray for someone in the presence of God if He had shed His blood for them.

Particular Intercession

Now, if all of that is true—and I trust that you can see from the text of Scripture itself that it is—that raises a key question: Does Christ intercede before the Father on behalf of all people without exception, or on behalf of the elect alone?

If we were to say that Christ was in heaven, praying to the Father for the application of salvation to all people without exception—including those whom the Father had not chosen to save—it would lead to two significant unbiblical conclusions. The first is: the Son would be asking for something out of accord with the Father’s will. Why do I say that? Because in the inscrutable wisdom of God, not all without exception are elect. The Father has chosen some, and not all, to be the special objects of His grace and mercy in salvation. And He has chosen to leave others in their deserved condemnation. Romans 9:22–23 says the Potter prepares vessels of wrath as well as vessels of mercy. If Jesus interceded for all without exception, He would be asking the Father to save those the Father has chosen not to save. The Son’s will would be opposed to the Father’s will. But that’s impossible, because the Father and the Son subsist in the identical divine essence, which means—not just that they always agree—but that they have the identical faculty of will. Any suggestion that the Son would desire to ask for something out of accord with the Father’s will undermines the doctrine of the Trinity.

A second unbiblical conclusion that a universal intercession leads to is that the Father would be constrained to refuse to grant the Son’s requests. If the Father has determined, before the foundation of the world, that He will not save the non-elect, and the Son prays for their salvation,

the Father will not answer those prayers. But can you even conceive of such a scenario? The Father, refusing to grant the earnest prayers of His Beloved Son, in whom He is well-pleased, for the salvation of those for whom Christ shed His precious blood! It's unthinkable! Jesus would be before the Father saying, "Father, I died for them! I shed My blood for them! I paid for their sins! Please save them and bring them to heaven," and the Father would say, "No, My Son, I will not."

The implications of a universal atonement are disastrous. Not only would it drive a wedge between the will of the Father and the will of the Son—fundamentally undermining the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity—but it demeans the worth of the blood of Christ in precisely the same way Owen was talking about in that passage I quoted at the beginning of the sermon. To say that the infinite merit of the blood of Christ in an insufficient ground for the Father to grant the Son's request! "But Father, I shed My blood for them!" "Your blood does not satisfy Me, Son." It's blasphemy! The Father always grants the requests of His Son! Jesus Himself says this in John chapter 11. He prays at Lazarus's tomb and says, John 11:41, "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. I knew that You *always* hear Me." The Father always hears His Son. And when you add to this that in Psalm 2:8, the Father tells the Son, "Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance, And the very ends of the earth as Your possession," it becomes even more unthinkable. The Father told the Son to ask Him for the salvation of the nations, and that He would do it. And then when the Son asks Him, He refuses to do it!

And so it's a theological impossibility for Christ to intercede for those who do not finally lay hold of salvation. But since not all without exception will be saved, we must conclude that the Son's intercession is limited to the elect.

Now, besides all that, Jesus Himself tells us who He intercedes for, in His high priestly prayer of John 17. On the eve of His sacrificial offering, the Great High Priest is interceding before the Father on behalf of those for whom He will soon offer Himself as a sacrifice. And in verse 9 He explicitly says of those whom the Father had given Him, "I ask on *their* behalf; I do *not* ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; for *they* are Yours." Look at this. Jesus explicitly denies that He intercedes for "the world." Instead, He intercedes for the ones who belong to the Father—those who He says, "are Yours"—those whom the Father had given to the Son. And who are they? They are the ones whom the Father chose in Christ before the foundation of the world, Ephesians 1:4. They are "the elect" of Romans 8:33. Here, upon the very precipice of His high priestly work of atonement, engaging in His high priestly work of intercession, Jesus explicitly refuses to intercede on behalf of the non-elect, but only for those whom the Father had given Him. This is a particular, not a universal, intercession.

So to summarize: since (a) the priestly work of sacrifice and intercession are inextricably linked—so much so that the extent of the two priestly acts must be identical, coextensive; and

since (b) Christ says He does not intercede for the world but only for His people; therefore, (c) it's right to conclude that He offered Himself as a sacrifice not for all without exception, but for those whom the Father had given Him. The extent of Christ's atonement—like the extent of His intercession—is limited to the elect.

III. Objection: “Father, Forgive Them”

And so the nature of the Old Covenant priesthood, as well as the nature of Christ's New Covenant priesthood has taught us that both the sacrifice and the intercession of Christ are particular, and not universal. That brings us to the third point of our sermon: a key **objection** raised against this line argumentation. And that objection is drawn from Jesus' prayer on the cross in Luke 23:34, where He prays for His persecutors, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” They say, “Here is the high priest, in the midst of His priestly work of atonement, asking for the Father to forgive the sins—to save—those who are crucifying Him. Now, it's obvious,” they say, “that not everyone Jesus prayed for was elect. So here's an example of high priestly intercession for the non-elect that would ultimately be ineffectual. (That is, it wouldn't lead to their salvation.) This proves,” they say, “that intercession is not necessarily limited to the elect, and, since the extent of the priestly intercession is identical to the extent of the priestly sacrifice, the atonement is not limited to the elect.” So there's the objection. What do we make of it?

Well, in the first place, some commentators offer the response that it may not have been that Jesus was praying for the forgiveness of sins unto salvation, but simply that the Father would delay the judgment that their wickedness immediately deserved. Almost like He was saying, “Father, don't strike them down for this! Be patient!” You might expect that those putting to death the *Son of God*, the *Author of Life*, the *King of the Universe* would be *disintegrated* on the spot by divine justice. In this case, “Christ's prayer is answered by the Father showing his patience and forgiveness by not bringing full judgment [immediately], thus allowing history to continue and God's ultimate purpose to save his elect to be realized” (Wellum, *FHHC*, 531). Now, while I think that's certainly a possible interpretation, I can understand why those raising this objection wouldn't be satisfied with it as a response. And in fact I think there are better responses.

A second response is that we must observe that there is particularity even in this prayer. The most that can be said is that Jesus prayed for the Father to forgive only those present at His crucifixion. It couldn't even be that He was praying for everyone who was involved in His crucifixion, because Judas was at the heart of it and he was the son of perdition (John 17:12); he was destined to perish eternally. Jesus pronounces woe upon him in Mark 14:21 and says that it would be better if he'd never been born! Judas is the arch-reprobate. Certainly Jesus knows that the Father never intended to save Judas. Which means that Jesus would not be praying, contrary

to the intention of the Father, for Judas's salvation at His crucifixion. So, at least some are excluded from Jesus' prayer. And remember: the burden of proof that a proponent of a universal atonement must meet is a universal intercession. If there's just one exception—as Judas certainly is—then their proposition fails.

Third, there is good reason to believe that Jesus' prayer was indeed effectual unto the salvation of everyone whom He prayed for in Luke 23:34. Just several verses later, in Luke 23:47, we're told that "when the centurion saw all that had happened, he began praising God, saying, 'Certainly this man was innocent.'" In the parallel account in Mark 15:39, the centurion says, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" This is indicative of the efficacy of Jesus' prayer. The Father forgave this Roman centurion, and brought him to repentance and faith. When Peter preached the Gospel on the Day of Pentecost, he addressed his hearers in Acts 2:23 as those who "nailed [Jesus] to a cross...and put Him to death." In verse 36 he spoke of "this Jesus whom you crucified." So these were people who were very much involved in the crucifixion, and likely heard Jesus' prayer for their forgiveness while He was on the cross. And in Acts 2:37, Luke tells us that Peter's hearers "were pierced to the heart," and, in verse 41, that "those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls." And in fact, in his next sermon in Acts 3, Peter preached the Gospel to those whom he says, Acts 3:15, "put to death the Prince of life." In Acts 4:4, Luke records that "many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand." Eventually, Acts 6:7 tells us that "a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith."

And so there is no reason to suppose that Luke 23:34 is an instance of Christ interceding unto salvation for the non-elect, much less all people without exception, which is the burden of proof that must be met by those holding to a universal intercession. He was interceding for the elect, for those His Father had given Him in eternity past, but who had not yet come to faith. Ultimately, the universalist objection fails, and the argument for particularism from the unity of the twofold function of Christ's priestly ministry stands.

Conclusion

Theology professor Dr. Robert Letham summarizes the argument well. He writes, "Christ's role as High Priest is a whole. It is one unified movement of grace towards humanity whereby he takes our place in obeying the Father, in atoning for our sins and bringing us to God. He makes very clear that he prays for us besides dying for us. This is a dominant theme in his high-priestly prayer to the Father in John chapter 17. In that prayer he says to the Father that he does not pray for the world but for those whom the Father had given him. . . . His intercession is limited. He prays for his own and not for the world. It follows that his atoning death is intended for those the Father had given him and not for all in an indiscriminate fashion. If we see the intercession as

particular and the cross as universal, we are positing a disruption in the heart of Christ's high-priestly work" (*The Work of Christ*, 236–37).

And so here is another argument, brothers and sisters, that safeguards the power and the perfection and the preciousness of the blood of Christ—that makes it impossible for us to say that anyone for whom Christ's blood was shed can fail to be brought all the way home to heaven. It makes it impossible for that scenario that John Owen imagined to ever take place, where souls for whom Christ died would be disowned by Him at the throne of divine judgment.

Instead, we who trust in Christ alone for righteousness may say with full assurance: "Lord, Your soul *was* heavy unto death for my sake! You *did* undergo for me that wrath that made You sweat drops of blood! You *did* bathe Yourself in Your own blood, that my blood *would* be spared! You *did* sanctify Yourself to be a priestly sacrifice for me as much as for the Apostles themselves! Lord, Your precious blood *was* poured out for me—by stripes, by sweat, by nails, by thorns, by spear! You *did* remember *me*—by name!—while You hung on the cross! And therefore, I will *never* hear the words that You never knew me! You knew me when the Father laid the burden of *my* sins upon Your back on the cross! Lord, I *am* an unworthy sinner, but Your own blood can never be despised by Your Father! Justice *did* content itself with that infinitely worthy sacrifice! And so *no one* can bring a charge against God's elect! Because Christ Jesus is He who *died*, yes, rather who was *raised*, who is at the right hand of God, who also *intercedes* for us!" Thanks be to God for the perfect redemption of Christ Jesus our Lord!

And to you who sit here this morning, still a stranger to that Savior, O, what could be keeping you from falling on your face and resting all your hope, all your confidence, all your trust upon Him? {Refer to audio for the final call to faith.}