

## JESUS IS OUR ETERNAL HIGH PRIEST

Sermon for Easter Sunday, 2018

Hebrews 7:23-27

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Hebrews 7:23-27: <sup>23</sup> **Many were made priests because death prevented them from continuing.** <sup>24</sup> **However, because Jesus continues for ever, the Priesthood that He has is permanent.** <sup>25</sup> **Therefore He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He is always alive to intercede for them.** <sup>26</sup> **For such a High Priest is what we needed, who is holy, blameless, spotless, separated from sinners, and has been made higher than the heavens.** <sup>27</sup> **He has no need to offer sacrifices every day, like those high priests, first for His own sins, and then for the sins of the people. For He did this once for all when He offered Himself.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

The 20th chapter of Numbers is interesting. It records several incidents that took place in the 40th year after the Israelites left Egypt. The chapter begins with the sin Moses and Aaron committed when they *struck* a rock at a place called Meribah instead of *speaking* to it as God commanded them. Because of this, they were told that they would not enter the Promised Land. Thus, when they came to a mountain called Mount Hor, Moses was told to ascend the mountain with his older brother Aaron and Aaron's son Eleazar. He was told to take the priestly garments off Aaron and place them on Aaron's son, and then Aaron died atop the mountain and Eleazar became Israel's new high priest.<sup>1</sup>

That same transition played out repeatedly in Old Testament history. The historian Josephus lists the names of 83 high priests who are known to have served from the time of Aaron in the wilderness to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD when sacrifices ceased. It is that constant passing of the mantle from one high priest to another that the writer of Hebrews focuses on in

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers 20:22-29

our reading today. As we look at his words we see Jesus as the eternal High Priest who has met all our needs for us and still intercedes for us.

Jesus is our great High Priest and different from all the other high priests who had served at the tabernacle and later at the temple in Jerusalem. He is different, the author of Hebrews points out, in that *He had no sin*. The other high priests were sinners - that's why they died. Whether they were obviously wicked men like Annas and Caiaphas, or whether they were good and decent men like Zadok who supported King David, and Joshua who returned from Babylon to oversee the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, they were all sinners. That is why, as our reading states, they had to offer sacrifices **first for (their) own sins, and then for the sins of the people.**

Here, the writer is referring to the ritual God had prescribed for the Day of Atonement, when atonement was made for the sins of the whole nation of Israel. On that day, the high priest could come into the Most Holy Place, but he could do so only after he had offered a bull as a sacrifice for his own sins and the sins of his household. Only with the blood of the bull that had died for his sins could the high priest come into the presence of God; he had to present that blood before the Lord as it says in Leviticus 16:2: "*or else he [would] die.*"

Jesus was different. If there is anything that is clear about Jesus, it is that He did not deserve to be on trial for His life. He did not deserve to die; He clearly had done nothing wrong. Pilate flat out admitted it: "*I do not find this Man guilty at all,*" (Luke 23:4). The Jewish Sanhedrin admitted it too by finding it necessary to hire false witnesses to testify against Jesus, but even they couldn't agree on their accusations.<sup>2</sup> Finally, there was Judas, who confessed his sin with these words: "*I have sinned by betraying innocent blood,*" (Matt. 27:4). The writer of Hebrews brings out this truth when he says that in Christ we have a High Priest "**who is holy, blameless, spotless, separated from sinners, and has been made higher than the heavens.**"

Look at Jesus anyway you want - on the inside He is holy. The all-seeing God could testify of Him: "*This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased,*" (Matt. 17:5). On the outside, He had no sin. Though He had to live among sinners, yet He never joined them in their sins. "*A lamb without blemish or defect,*" Peter

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 14:56-59

describes Him, (1 Peter 1:19). Jesus once challenged His enemies with these words: “*Which of you can prove Me guilty of sin?*” (John 8:46). Even those enemies who carefully watched Jesus’ every move and asked Him trick questions to trip Him up in His words failed.<sup>3</sup> That’s why Jesus didn’t have to first offer a sacrifice for His own sins before offering a sacrifice for the sins of the people.

It is for that reason, why the results of His sacrifice are different. Notice that the writer of Hebrews stresses the repetition of the sacrifices offered by the Levitical priests. Those priests had to **offer sacrifices every day**. This was because those animal sacrifices couldn’t take away sins. “*The person who sins is the one who will die*,” God says (Ezek. 18:20). The endless sacrifices of the Old Testament couldn’t take away sin; they could only proclaim and foreshadow and point people ahead to the promised Saviour who would pay for sin once for all, and that is exactly what Jesus did. As the great High Priest, Jesus offered Himself on the altar of the cross, and that sacrifice was sufficient to satisfy the justice of the holy God in heaven. It did what the Old Testament priesthood could not do - once for all it removed the guilt of sin from all of us whose souls were stained by sin and deserving of eternal death. How do we know? How can we be sure? Because Jesus our great High Priest lives forever! This is how we know that Jesus is God’s Son and that all our sins are forgiven. Jesus lives forever! On this Easter Day, we rejoice to know that God proclaimed the complete sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice by raising Him from the dead and seating Him at His right hand in glory.<sup>4</sup> The One who was delivered over to death for our sins was raised to life for the sake of our justification.<sup>5</sup>

It is this fact that leads the Apostle Paul to rejoice as he does in 1 Corinthians chapter 15. There we hear his exultant cry: “*Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?*”<sup>56</sup> *The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the Law.*<sup>57</sup> *However, thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!*” (55-57). Paul understood what makes death so scary - it is sin. Unless something intervenes, death delivers sinners into the terrible punishment in

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 20:20

<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 1:20

<sup>5</sup> Romans 4:25

hell that has been prepared for the devil and his angels.<sup>6</sup> It is this knowledge, found even in the hearts of heathen people and unbelievers, that makes death so fearsome.

Praise God, because Jesus has met our every need for us! By paying for sin, Christ pulled the stinger out of death and rendered it powerless to hurt all who find forgiveness of sin in the wounds of the risen Saviour. Now far from hurting us as Christians, death serves to bring us into the glorious presence of our great High Priest who has met our every need for us. In addition to this, by His resurrection, Christ has broken the iron grip of the grave and promises that all who fall asleep in Him will rise as He did to live forever with Him in heaven. Death can no longer hurt us, and the grave will not hold us. When our risen Redeemer at His glorious return commands the graves of His people to give up those who sleep in them, those who sleep will rise to live forever. The Apostle Paul says, “*For the Lord Himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead who are in Christ will rise first,*” (1 Thess. 4:16). This is the promise of Jesus, who lives forever and who says, “*Because I live, you also will live,*” (John 14:19). Truly, Jesus has met our every need for us, has risen from the dead, and He still lives to intercede for us.

Our reading begins with the statement that “<sup>23</sup> **Many were made priests because death prevented them from continuing.**” The death of a high priest was a sad occasion in Israel. The nation mourned for 30 days when Aaron died. On the other hand, the anointing of Aaron 40 years earlier became a metaphor for joy. King David in Psalm 133 speaks of *how good and pleasant it is when brothers live together!* <sup>2</sup> *It is like fine olive-oil on the head, flowing down the beard, down on Aaron’s beard, flowing down on the collar of his robes,* (v. 1-2). Having a high priest was a good thing. He made intercession for the people. He was the *mediator* between the sinful people he served and heaven’s holy God.

Aaron was a good example of that intercessory work. On one occasion during the wilderness wandering, a man by the name of Korah led a rebellion against Moses and Aaron.<sup>7</sup> He challenged their right to lead the people, and as a result, the

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 25:41

<sup>7</sup> Numbers 16

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earth opened up and swallowed Korah and his family. The next day, the rest of the people complained about the punishment of Korah and his rebellious clan. The LORD became angry and told Moses and Aaron to move away from the people because He was ready to destroy them, and a plague struck the people. But Moses told Aaron, <sup>46</sup> *Take the fire-pan, and put fire from the altar on it! Lay incense on it, and hurry into the congregation and make atonement for them! For wrath has come out from the LORD. The plague has begun.* <sup>47</sup> *So Aaron took it, as Moses had told him, and ran into the middle of the congregation. Indeed, the plague had already begun among the people. Aaron put on the incense and made atonement for the people.* <sup>48</sup> *He stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was brought to a standstill,* (Num. 16:46-48). Nearly 15 thousand people died, but greater loss was prevented by Aaron's intercession. What compassion he showed! That was the work of the high priest - to plead and intercede for the people he served. Aaron did that until he died; then his work was done.

Jesus is the great High Priest because He is the eternal High Priest. Yes, He died, but He rose from the dead and lives *to intercede* for His people. What does that mean?

We get a look at our Lord's intercessory work on behalf of His people already during His earthly ministry. During our Passion History which we read throughout our mid-week Lenten services, we heard Jesus warn Simon Peter against pride and say to him, *"I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail,"* (Luke 22:32). We heard how Jesus on the cross prayed, *"Father, forgive them! For they do not know what they are doing,"* (Luke 23:34), and in the upper room He prayed, *"Father, I desire that those also whom you have given to Me may be with Me... so that they may see My glory,"* (John 17:24). We see the compassionate heart of our great High Priest on this Easter day. In today's Gospel reading, Mark tells us that the risen Lord's angelic messengers told the first visitors at Jesus' empty tomb to make sure Peter heard the good news of Easter. For three days, a burden of guilt had weighed on Peter's heart - he had denied his Lord! But on the third day, the risen Jesus through His angels said, *"Go, however, and tell His disciples and Peter"* all you have seen, (Mark 16:7). Such is the tender concern of our great High Priest for His sinful people. *"Tell Peter,"* Jesus said - make sure He knows the joy of forgiveness and enjoys the peace of Easter. What a joy to have such a compassionate High Priest interceding with the Father on our behalf! Is it

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any wonder then why we sing, “He lives to bless me with His love; He lives to plead for me above. He lives, my hungry soul to feed; He lives to help in time of need,” (LH 103 v.3).

May we who are now the messengers of our risen Saviour, go with that same compassion to others, telling them the good news of forgiveness and peace in Jesus!

Let us take to heart the message of the writer of Hebrews this Easter Day: Jesus our great High Priest lives forever! Jesus’ resurrection assures us that He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him. He is our great High Priest who has met all our needs for us and who still intercedes for us at the right hand of God. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

#### PRAYER FOR EASTER SUNDAY

Heavenly Father, we thank and praise You for Your mercy in raising from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank You for the assurance His resurrection gives us of all our spiritual blessings.

Give us today the radiant joy of the first Easter. Fill our hearts with its glorious good news and precious promises. Make us glad that You have raised Christ, who was delivered because of our offences in order that You might reckon us as righteous before You. We praise You that, because of His resurrection from the dead, You will also raise us, and that death has no more power over us.

Grant us a living faith, free of all doubts, a faith that accepts the sure evidence of His resurrection. Give us power to confess our risen Lord Jesus with our mouths. Grant that we may be faithful unto death, and receive the crown of life. Equip us through Christ, our life, who now sits as a human being like us, at Your right hand, with power to live the new life, with our minds on Him, our heavenly treasure.

Guide us by Your Word as we make our way through this world, so that we may walk in Your ways, trust in Your promises, and experience Your richest blessings in this life and the one to come.

Look in mercy on our homes. Fill our families with a sense of Your goodness and providence. Teach them to rejoice especially in the gift of endless life in Your risen Son.

Rule the nations of the earth, and lead them to be obedient to You. Direct the lives of all people, that they may fear and love You, and know the risen Lord, who has the words of eternal life.

We pray for Your Church. Grant that everywhere it may have faithful and true shepherds, who proclaim the Gospel with conviction. Give all believers greater confidence because of Jesus' resurrection.

Grant us a rich measure of Your Spirit, provide us with power, willingness, to do Your will, and the courage and ability to make your Gospel known to others. To Christ be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

## THE RESURRECTION OF OUR LORD, EASTER DAY

Isaiah 25:6-9

<sup>6</sup> On this mountain the LORD of hosts will prepare for all peoples a banquet of rich food, a banquet with aged wines, rich foods full of marrow and refined, aged wines. <sup>7</sup> On this mountain He will destroy the surface of the shroud that is covering all peoples and the blanket that has been woven over all nations. <sup>8</sup> He will swallow up death for ever. The Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces and remove the disgrace of His people from the whole earth. For the LORD has spoken. <sup>9</sup> On that day people will say: "Look! This is our God. We have been waiting for Him to save us. This is the LORD, for whom we

have been waiting. Let us rejoice and be glad that He has saved us!"

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

<sup>1</sup> My fellow-Christians, I am telling you the Good News that I told you, which you also received and on which you also stand. <sup>2</sup> You are also saved by it if you cling to the Word that I have preached to you, unless you have become believers in vain. <sup>3</sup> For I delivered to you, first of all, what I also received: that Christ died for our sins as the Scriptures said He would, <sup>4</sup> and that He was buried and that He was raised again on the third day as the Scriptures said He would, <sup>5</sup> and that He appeared to Cephas and then to the Twelve. <sup>6</sup> After that, He appeared to more than five hundred Christians at the same time, most of whom are still living, but some have fallen

asleep. <sup>7</sup> Then He appeared to James and then to all the apostles, <sup>8</sup> and, last of all, He appeared to me also, as to someone abnormally born. <sup>9</sup> For I am the least of the apostles and do not deserve to be called an apostle, because I had been persecuting the church of God. <sup>10</sup> However, by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me has not been without effect; but I have worked harder than all the others have — yet not I, but the grace of God, which has been with me. <sup>11</sup> Now, whether I have done it or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you have believed.

Mark 16:1-8

<sup>1</sup> When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome bought spices to go and anoint Jesus. <sup>2</sup> On Sunday they were coming to the tomb very early when the sun had just come up.

<sup>3</sup> They asked one another, “Who is going to roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?”

<sup>4</sup> However, when they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back, even though it was very large. <sup>5</sup> As they went into the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting at the right side and were amazed.

<sup>6</sup> He told them, “Do not be amazed any longer! You are looking for Jesus from Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen. He is not here. See the place where He was laid! <sup>7</sup> Go, however, and tell His disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see Him, just as He told you!’”

<sup>8</sup> They went out and hurried away from the tomb, because they were trembling and bewildered, and said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.