

Christ is our Great High Priest

The high priests of the Old Testament had two major assignments: They offered sacrifices for the people and they interceded with God for the people as they offered those sacrifices. The high priest was set apart from the people and anointed for this special work. He was to be physically flawless; any physical defect would exclude him from so sacred an office and work. His vestments were of the finest linen, so that he would not sweat in them when he offered his sacrifices. He was in many respects removed from the common life of his countrymen to symbolise that in his person and work he was separate as the special and holy intermediary between God and His people. He wore a breast-plate with the names of the tribes of Israel inscribed on it in precious stones, so that he would always know and remember that his function was to intercede with God for the people (Exodus 28, 29; Leviticus 8, 9). The outward purity and holiness of the Old Testament high priests was to serve as a shadow and a picture of the one Great High Priest to come: Jesus Christ. He was the fulfilment of the purity and holiness that the Old Testament high priests could only picture. Thus, Christ is unique. He is the Great High Priest because He comes into the presence of His Father not just with an appearance of holiness like the high priests in the Old Testament but with real, actual, perfect holiness. There is no stain of sin in Him. There is nothing that He needs to repent of and nothing for which He needs forgiveness.

Of all the sacrifices that the high priest offered, the most important was that offered on the great Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16). On that day the high priest would enter God's throne room on earth: the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle and, after the time of Solomon, in the temple. He entered it twice on that day and on no other. Each time he brought blood with him, the blood of a bull for his own sins and the blood of a goat for the sins of the people. The blood was sprinkled over the top of the ark of the covenant, called the mercy seat. The sprinkling of the blood covered up the stone tablets of the Law, which were inside the ark. With the Law covered up, so too then were the sins against it likewise covered by that blood. The high priest then took a second goat, called the scapegoat, and confessed the sins of the people over the goat. The goat, bearing the sins confessed over him, was then driven out of the camp and into the wilderness to die.

Christ, the Great High Priest, fulfilled all of those pictures. He offered a sacrifice, but His was not the sacrifice of bulls and goats or sheep. His was the sacrifice of Himself as the perfect Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29, 36). He endured the cross and the shame, suffering, and death. He, the almighty Son of God, at whose command the legions of angels stand at the ready (Matthew 26:53-54), refused to lift a finger of His own or a feather of any angel's wing to prevent or even lessen His torment. His is a perfect sacrifice on so many different counts. It is perfect because the One suffering is perfect; it is not for Himself that He endures suffering but for us, for all mankind. It is perfect because He endures it willingly and freely just as Isaiah prophesied about Him in Isaiah 53. It is the perfect sacrifice at the time of His own choosing. It is perfect in that it cannot be matched by any other sacrifice and because it need not be matched by any other sacrifice. His is the all-sufficient sacrifice, active as He wills it and passive as He permits and endures it, for the sins of the world. It is perfect because it covers the punishment due to all mankind and the debt owed to God for the sin of the whole world. From eternity to eternity the perfect sacrifice of the Great High Priest avails before the throne of God as the one, the only, the all-sufficient sacrifice for sin.

With the blood of His sacrifice He enters into the Holy of Holies in heaven as the Great High Priest for all mankind. He presents Himself as the perfect Priest with the perfect sacrifice. He has once and for all poured out His own blood most holy to cover all the unholiness of sinful, fallen humankind. To this day and into eternity He continues as our Great High Priest, successfully interceding for us by virtue of His perfect sacrifice for us. St. John beautifully describes that work of intercession so inseparably linked to Christ's sacrifice for us. He tells us, *"If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the propitiation for our sins and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world"* (1 John 2:1-2).

What a perfect description of Christ's high priestly work! To this day, in this very hour, when we pray for forgiveness, there is our Great High Priest, the Holy One, acting on our behalf, interceding for us. In an eternal procession before the Most Holy Place in heaven He carries the blood of His own sacrifice that has once and for all won our pardon. His sacrifice, His blood, has washed away all our sins. Think of that grand and glorious, that saving procession of Christ behind the veil in the Most Holy Place in heaven – it's going on even as you pray. It continues at every cry of the penitent: "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" Again, we cannot help but note that it is biblical understatement to call Him who serves us: Great! While there is no other word that will do, that one word just seems too small for Him as our Great High Priest in His high priestly office.