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With the persistent watering down of ‘Christ’s gospel’ in the professing church in the Western world over the last 100 years, many modern churchgoers have little understanding of the plan of salvation and the role of Jesus as the mediating High Priest between God and sinners that is so central to it. This book is an attempt to explain the priestly activity that Jesus is presently engaged in and its crucial importance for all who profess to be Christians or want to know why they should become one.

Our Lord’s high priestly prayer in John 17 is pivotal to this purpose. Over the Christian Church’s history of nearly 2000 years, John 1 (the incarnation) and John 3 (the new birth) have been regarded as majestic peaks in this Himalayan Range of divinely revealed truth, but of all the chapters in the gospel I believe that John 17 stands out as Mount Everest. It is the greatest prayer ever prayed, containing some of the richest and most important truths of salvation revealed in Scripture. If we were to meditate on this passage for the rest of our days, we would still not be able to scale its sublime heights; but the attempt to do so will bring God-glorifying changes to our lives.

Great men of the past have written lengthy books in their efforts to expound this single chapter. Two of them were contemporaries, Puritans who lived and preached in the 17th century. George Newton (1602-1681) preached fifty

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six sermons on these twenty six verses that now make up his commentary on John 17. He was a godly man and a good preacher under whom Joseph Alleine (best known for his *Alarm to the Unconverted*) served as assistant from 1655 until both men were ejected from the Church of England in 1662 by the Act of Uniformity. In 1668 George Newton preached the sermon at the funeral of Joseph Alleine. The other Puritan minister was Thomas Manton (1620-1677) who at one time was Oliver Cromwell's chaplain and who preached a series of 45 sermons on John 17, also available in book form.

The next great commentary on this magnificent chapter was written by the noted Irish preacher, Marcus Rainsford (1820-1897), whose advice and support was eagerly sought by D. L. Moody and Ira Sankey when they conducted their successful evangelistic campaigns in London in 1875 and 1883-84. His exposition consisted of forty one sermons that were first published under the title, *Lectures on St. John 17*. After several editions, it is now entitled, *Our Lord Prays for His Own*.

Between 1952 and 1953 one of the 20th century's most gifted preachers, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, delivered a series of forty eight sermons on John 17, now published under the title *The Assurance of Our Salvation*. All these commentaries, however, are 500 or more pages long, and because of modern time constraints would prove difficult for the average person in the pew to read. It would seem, therefore, that a shorter, faithful and comprehensive devotional commentary on our Lord's prayer for His own would be a helpful alternative for many believers.

Our Lord's practice of praying is often mentioned in the Gospels (Mark 1:35; 6:46; Luke 5:16; 6:12; 11:1), but seldom is the content of His prayer given. When He prayed aloud in public His prayers were always brief (Matt. 11:25-26; 26:39,42; Luke 23:34,46; John 11:41; 12:27). The notable exception is His prayer in the presence of His disciples in

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the Upper Room recorded in detail in John 17. Although Jesus is praying to God the Father, He prays aloud because He wants His disciples to hear the kind of prayers their great High Priest will continually offer on their behalf in heaven before the throne of God. He wants us to know that His prayers for our salvation will be heard and answered; that His Father will not refuse Him, because He only asks for what His Father has promised to do for Him and the people He has come to redeem. He wants us on the eve of His crucifixion to be comforted by what He has to say to God concerning the foreordination of His death, resurrection and exaltation to secure the eternal salvation of His people.

And what does Jesus have to say? Essentially He bases His prayer on the great plan of salvation that was drawn up within the counsel of the Triune Godhead before the world began giving the Son an innumerable multitude of people to redeem from our fallen race as an everlasting inheritance; a plan requiring Him to come to earth and offer His body and soul as an atonement for their sins so that He might make God experientially known to them, whom to know is eternal life; and to that end a plan to keep them from disunity, error and evil in a hostile world, until finally they are brought home to heaven where they will behold the full glory to be given Him by the Father as their exalted God-man Redeemer High Priest. Never was such a glorious plan involving such enormous sacrifice devised for such undeserving creatures.

Our Lord entered this world as a man because, as He tells us some thirty times in John's Gospel, He was 'sent' by the Father to carry out this plan of salvation by acting as the sole high priest and mediator between God and men (1 Tim. 2:5). When Adam sinned God and the entire human race became estranged, and as a result mutual hostility has prevailed ever since. Concerning man, Paul says, "The carnal

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mind [the unregenerate mind of the unbeliever] is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God' (Rom. 8:7-8). Concerning God, Paul is just as clear: 'the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness' (Rom. 1:18).

All men, because they are sinners, need a mediator who will serve the cause of justice and bring reconciliation and goodwill to their relationship with God. In the Old Testament God appointed Aaron and his sons to this role when they served as high priests to the house of Israel, but their service was only typical (a God-ordained symbolic act) and anticipated Christ's high priestly service. For example, they were mere mortal beings whose work came to an end when they died, whereas Jesus 'according to the power of an endless life' and 'because He continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood' (Heb. 7:16,24). Indeed Psalm 110:4 records the oath by which the Father made Him an eternal priest, saying: 'The Lord has sworn and will not relent, "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek."'

Again, the high priests of the Old Testament were also sinful, whereas Christ, whose priesthood replaces theirs, is sinless. 'For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners ... who does not need daily to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people's, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself' (Heb. 7:26-27).

This does not mean, however, that the people served by the Aaronic priesthood derived no blessing from it. On the contrary, its efficacy, limited though it was, was due to our Lord's pre-incarnate ministry through it, whereby His blessing of salvation was imparted to them. Thus sins committed by true believers in the Old Testament were in a sense charged

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to Christ's account, to be later remitted by His death on the cross (Acts 17:30-31; Rom. 3:21-26; Heb. 9:11-15).

Moreover, it was the Spirit of Christ who by the words of the prophets and the prayers of the high priests enabled God's people from creation to Calvary to experience the joy of regeneration and the assurance of pardon that David testifies to in Psalm 51. The fact that God did this before justice had been satisfied, could have opened Him to the charge of being unrighteous. But such a charge was quickly put to rest when in the fulness of time our Lord came, 'whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed [by former generations of believers], to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus' (Rom. 3:25-26).

Seeing then that Jesus is a superior High Priest who has forever replaced the Aaronic high priests, what is the nature of His priesthood? The Westminster Shorter Catechism replies: 'Christ executeth the office of a priest, in His once offering up of Himself a *sacrifice* to satisfy divine justice and reconcile us to God, and in making continual *intercession* for us' (Answer 25, *italics mine*).

These are the two main functions of a high priest ordained by God. First, he must offer *sacrifice* to God as an atonement for sins: 'For every high priest taken from among men is appointed for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins' (Heb. 5:1). This sacrifice for sin our Lord offered once for all on the cross of Calvary when He 'came as High Priest ... not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood ... once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many' (Heb. 9:11,12,26-28).

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Physical and spiritual death is the penalty God's law demands for our sin (Rom. 6:23) and Jesus as our great eternal High Priest has paid that debt for all His people in full. Reconciliation with God has been achieved, and so they can approach Him at any time with the full assurance that access will not be barred to them, nor sin's penalty inflicted on them. 'Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience' (Heb. 10:19-22).

In the Old Testament the ministry of offering sacrifice for sins was in two stages. In the first stage the innocent, unblemished animal was killed outside in the courtyard of the temple. In the second stage its blood (the evidence that it had been killed) was taken inside the temple by the high priest and sprinkled on and before the mercy seat of the ark of the Testimony behind the veil in the Most Holy place (Lev. 16:14-15). In this way the benefit of the death of the innocent substitute was presented to God 'to make atonement for himself, for his household, and for all the assembly of Israel' (v. 17). This was done once a year on the Day of Atonement.

How did our Lord fulfil the two parts of this sacrificial ritual? First, He shed His innocent blood outside heaven on the cross; and then, secondly, He entered the heavenly temple to appear before God on our behalf taking with Him (metaphorically speaking) His own blood. What He took with Him, of course, was not His literal blood, but the literal wounds of His sacrifice on the cross for our sins. In other words, He took with Him into the presence of God the evidence of His death as a perpetual memorial of the efficacy of the sacrifice of Himself 'once for all' for our sins (Heb. 7:27; 9:28; 10:10).

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Jesus Christ's continual high priestly activity in heaven is vitally tied up with the sacrifice He once offered on the cross of Calvary. As John Murray says, 'It is necessary to remember that He eternally embodies in Himself the efficacy that accrued from His sacrifice upon the cross and that it is in virtue of such efficacy that He exercises His heavenly ministry as the great High Priest of our profession. It is on this ground that He intercedes on behalf of His people.' ¹

Charles Wesley (1707-1788) expressed this truth well in his stirring hymn:

Arise, my soul, arise, shake off thy guilty fears:
The bleeding Sacrifice in my behalf appears:
Before the Throne my Surety stands,
My name is written on His hands.

He ever lives above for me to intercede,
His all redeeming love, His precious blood to plead;
His blood atoned for all our race,
And sprinkles now the throne of grace.

Five bleeding wounds He bears, received on Calvary;
They pour effectual prayers, they strongly plead for me;
'Forgive him, Oh, forgive,' they cry,
'Nor let that ransomed sinner die.'

My God is reconciled; His pard'ning voice I hear;
He owns me for His child, I can no longer fear;
With confidence I now draw nigh,
And 'Father, Abba, Father!' cry.

The second function of the high priest of Israel on the Day of Atonement was to make *intercession* before God on behalf of His people. Once again the ritual was symbolic,

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for the high priest was commanded to ‘take a censer full of burning coals of fire from the altar before the Lord, with his hands full of sweet incense beaten fine, and bring it inside the veil. And he shall put the incense on the fire before the Lord, that the cloud of incense may cover the mercy seat that is on the Testimony, lest he die’ (Lev. 16:12-13).

Incense in the Old Testament was a symbol of intercession (Ps. 141:2; Rev. 5:8), for salvation involves not only sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins, but also intercession for our deliverance from sin. Thus in the two references in the New Testament where our Lord’s heavenly priestly intercession is specifically mentioned, it is connected and made dependent on His propitiatory death. In Romans 8:34 Paul says, ‘Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us’ (NIV).

Again, the writer in Hebrews 7:25-27 says, ‘He always lives to make intercession for them. For such a High Priest was fitting for us ... who does not need daily ... to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people’s, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself.’ These two high priestly functions (Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice of Himself for sins and His continuous intercession for His people) are not to be divorced, though they are to be distinguished from each other. Though the sacrifice was offered once, its infinite virtue is perpetually advanced by His heavenly intercession to cover all our sins past, present and future, including our ultimate deliverance from all evil. The purification of sins was made once at Calvary, but the application of it in heaven is for all time.

The latter is clearly brought out in Hebrews 7:25, ‘Therefore He is able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.’ The NIV has ‘to save completely’, and the NEB ‘to save

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absolutely'. Moreover the Greek word translated 'to intercede' does not only mean to petition or make request. 'The idea is not *intercession*, but *intervention*.'² Its primary meaning is to busy yourself more generally on behalf of others; to actively intervene in all situations on their behalf to do whatever is necessary for their good.

Our Lord is seated in heaven not only as our High Priest but as 'King of kings, and Lord of lords' (Rev. 19:16), 'far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come' (Eph. 1:21). No one in the Old Testament ever served as both priest and king except 'Melchizedek [meaning king of righteousness], king of Salem [meaning king of peace], priest of the Most High God ... resembling the Son of God' (Heb. 7:1,3; RSV), for Melchizedek was the figure and Christ the reality. So we must think of Jesus as a throned Priest-King not only *resting* from His finished work of atonement, but also *reigning* in the continuous work of saving completely those who come to God through Him. For it is His intercessory activity that ensures their salvation to the uttermost. All dangers and all needs are under the control of Him who sits on the throne of God and in that place of supreme authority is able to deliver us from all our foes and supply all our needs.

To be sure, our divine-human High Priest still petitions the Father for what He knows is the Father's will for those 'given' to Him, but by His gift of the Holy Spirit to teach, equip and empower His people, He also accomplishes the Father's will. We must therefore define our Lord's continual priestly intercession as that heavenly activity by which every grace bestowed and every obstacle overcome brings His saints safe at last to glory. The security of every believer's salvation is guaranteed by His continual intercession, and without His intercession there can be no salvation to the 'uttermost' for any of us.

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Beyond this basic description of the nature of our Lord Jesus Christ's heavenly priestly activity the New Testament will not allow us to speculate. But whatever precise form it takes, there is boundless comfort and steadfast hope in the knowledge that His continual heavenly intercession for us is unfailingly and fully effective. And of all the passages in Scripture on this theme, none can help us more than John 17 which is the pattern our Lord Himself left us of the kind of intercession He commenced when He ascended into heaven and will not cease 'till all the ransomed church of God be saved to sin no more'.³

John Knox (c. 1514-1572), the great leader of the Protestant Reformation in Scotland, found immense comfort in these wonderful words. In the last moments of his life he asked his wife to read John 17 to him, and as she was doing so, his soul slipped peacefully away into the presence of Christ his Master, whom he had served so well.

By God's good grace may every reader of this book personally experience the divine life, joy, unity, holiness, protection and love that Jesus our great High Priest requests for His people in John 17, the greatest prayer ever prayed.

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