

HE EVER LIVETH TO INTERCEDE

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Wherefore also he is able to save to the uttermost them that draw near unto God through him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them. Hebrews 7:25

Years ago, in the city of Philadelphia, I went to hear an eminent musician. He played with genius and skill some magnificent music, but the pieces were nearly all new to me, and, as often happens in such cases, it required so much effort to comprehend the idea of the piece, that I could but partially enjoy its beauty. At length, upon being loudly applauded, the musician returned, and seating himself at the instrument, struck out in full tones the opening notes of "Home, Sweet Home." I shall never forget while I live the thrill that passed through the audience. I seemed to feel that it was approaching me, seemed to feel when it reached and embraced me. That was a theme all could comprehend, and rich for us all in a thousand delightful suggestions and associations; and, strangers as we were, the hearts of the vast assembly seemed melted into one as we listened to those swelling tones.

My brethren, I wish it might always be so with us when one begins to speak to us of Jesus. There is many a subject of public discourse that well deserves our attention. Especially the topics drawn from the Bible and usually presented from the pulpit are all important and should all be interesting. Whatever pertains to God and his province, to his gracious dealings with man in the past, and his purposes of mercy for the future, whatever to the condition and wants of our race as sinful and immortal, should awaken our minds and impress our hearts. Difficult and mysterious as some of these topics are, they are useful; and if we resist the temptation to wander into speculation or descend into secularity, they will give us pleasure and do us good. But Jesus-it is a theme which all alike can understand, in which all alike are profoundly concerned, a theme associated with all the sweetest recollections of our spiritual life, with all the brightest hopes of our immortal future. Ah! we are perishing and helpless sinners, and it ought to thrill through our very hearts, to link us in living sympathy, and kindle our souls into a glow of love and joy to hear of Jesus, our divine, our loving, our precious Saviour. It ought to be not mere poetry, but the true expression of genuine feeling, when we sing,

*Jesus, I love thy charming name;
'Tis music to mine ear;
Fain would I sound it out so loud
That earth and heaven might hear.*

And my text today treats of Jesus.

The Jewish Christians to whom this Epistle was addressed were strongly urged, both in the way of persecution and persuasion, to apostatize from Christianity, and return to Judaism. Among the arguments employed for this purpose, it was urged that Christianity had no priesthood, no sacrifice or temple, and so was really no religion at all. The inspired writer of this Epistle meets these arguments, and, in fact, turns them into proofs of the superiority of Christianity. Thus, in regard to the priesthood, he shows that Christianity has a priest, a great High Priest, immensely superior to the Levitical priesthood. His office is held forever. He has offered, once for all, the wonderful sacrifice of himself,

which is forever sufficient. He has passed through the heavens into the true sanctuary, bearing his own precious, atoning blood. Then Christianity is superior in this, as in other respects, to Judaism, that is, to the Mosaic dispensation if regarded as complete in itself, and designed to be permanent; and so the sacred writer urges his brethren not to apostatize, interspersing everywhere throughout his arguments the most earnest exhortations to hold fast their profession, the most solemn warnings of the guilt and ruin of apostasy. For us as well as for them, grievous is the guilt and hopeless the ruin of abandoning the gospel of Christ, our sole hope of salvation.

One of the points he makes to prove this superiority of Christ and Christianity, is that from which the text is an inference. The Levitical priesthood was held by many persons in succession, "because that by death they were hindered from continuing"; but Jesus, "because he abideth forever, hath his priesthood unchangeable. Wherefore he is able to save to the uttermost them that draw near unto God through him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them." The phrase translated "to the uttermost" signifies "perfectly," "completely"; he can save completely, can complete the salvation of them that come unto God through him. And the thought of the text is that he is able to complete their salvation, because he ever lives to intercede for them.

Perhaps we are accustomed to look too exclusively to the Saviour's atoning death, not dwelling as we should upon the idea of his interceding life. See how the apostle speaks in Romans: "For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life." And again: "Christ Jesus that died, yea rather that was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us." He who loved us and gave himself for us ever liveth to accomplish the objects for which he died; as the mediatorial priest, he is ever interceding for the salvation of them that come unto God through him; as the mediatorial king, having all authority given unto him in heaven and earth, he controls all things so as to carry forward to completion the work of their salvation.

My brethren, it is just such a Saviour that we need. From the first moment when we approach God through him, onward through life, and in a certain just sense onward without end, we continually need God's mercy and grace for the Saviour's sake. If we dwell on this, we shall be better prepared to rejoice that our great High Priest ever lives to intercede for us, and thus can complete our salvation.

1. *We are tempted.* And what hope have we of conquering temptation, save "through him that loved us"? Remember what our Lord said to his disciples, with regard to the sore temptations that would soon befall them: "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan asked to have you, that he might sift you as wheat; but I made supplication for thee, that thy faith fail not." As Satan is described as seeking permission from that Sovereign Ruler, without whose permission all his might and his malice are powerless, to tempt Job with peculiar trials, in the hope that he could bring him to renounce the Lord, so here as to the disciples: "Satan asked to have you"-and the term, as well as the connection, shows that he was permitted to have them, "that he might sift you as wheat."

Jesus himself is represented by John the Baptist as engaged in a similar process: "Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly cleanse his threshing-floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." But how different is the object in the two cases! Satan sifts with the hope of showing that all is really worthless, fit only for destruction. Jesus sifts in order to separate the precious from the vile, and preserve the pure wheat for the garner of heaven. And often what Satan meant as a sifting for evil is overruled by the stronger power so as to be for good.

How was it with Peter? The Saviour said: "But I made supplication for thee, that thy faith fail not";

and though his faith mournfully gave way, it did not utterly give out. I am not excusing Peter at all. We may be sure he never forgave himself. It was a sad and shameful fall; but Jesus had made supplication for him; and how different the result in his case from that of Judas. He, too, was one of those whom Satan obtained to sift them, and the result proved him to be all that Satan could wish. When he saw the consequences of his horrid crime, and had time to reflect upon it, he was sorry; but it was not the tender grief of a truly penitent heart which would have brought him back with humble submission-it was the sorrow of the world that worketh death-it was remorse that drove him headlong into self-destruction. But Peter, when the cock crowed after his third denial of his Lord and that injured one turned and looked upon him, Peter went out and wept bitterly, with the sorrow "that worketh repentance unto salvation," the sorrow of a deeply humble and really loving heart. There was a great change from that time in Peter, for the Lord had prayed for him, and divine grace not only preserved him from utter spiritual ruin, but overruled his own dreadful wickedness to his spiritual good.

Observe with what special emphasis the Saviour's intercession for the tempted is spoken of in this Epistle. The persons therein addressed were, as we have seen, peculiarly and sorely tempted-tempted even to forsake Christianity, through which alone they could find salvation; apart from which "there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment and a fierceness of fire which shall devour the adversary." The Jewish high priest, being taken from among men, "could bear gently with the ignorant and erring, for that he himself also was compassed with infirmity." So our great High Priest took upon him human nature partly for this very reason, that he might sympathize with the tempted, and that we might feel sure he does sympathize. "Wherefore in all things it behooved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, as he is able to succor them that are tempted."

It is because of his atoning sacrifice and sympathizing intercession that we are urged to hold fast our profession as Christians, and encouraged to come to God with entire confidence. This is done in words that have been very dear to tempted hearts in every age since the holy man of God spake them as he was moved by the Holy Ghost. "Having, then, a great High Priest who hath passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we have not a high priest that cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but one that hath been in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore draw near with boldness unto the throne of grace that we may receive mercy, and may find grace to help us in time of need."

Ah! mighty, to the most favored, are the temptations of life. Many belong to all periods; others mark some special season. Many are "common to man"; others belong to some particular condition or calling. "The heart knoweth its own bitterness"; yea, and its own trials, and its own weakness. Be this our support-our Saviour lives, he sympathizes with us, he intercedes for us; let us draw near unto God through him, unto God who has said, "As thy days, so shall thy strength be."

*The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose,
I will not, I will not desert to its foes;
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I'll never, no never, no never forsake.*

2. But many times, sad as is the confession, we yield to temptation, we sin; and "the soul that sinneth, it shall die." Must we then despair? Must the hopes we had cherished be abandoned, and this new sin be the terror of our souls? Listen! The apostle John wrote an Epistle for the express purpose of

restraining his brethren from sin; yet he does not cut off those who are conscious they have sinned from the hope of forgiveness and salvation. He says: "My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye may not sin. And if any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous; and he is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for the whole world."

Now we know what an advocate was, according to the usages of the Roman law, and is among ourselves, viz.: one who undertakes the management of another's case in court, and pleads his cause. So Jesus is our advocate with the Father. But, as in other cases where spiritual things are illustrated by temporal, the analogy is not perfect; there are differences. Our advocate does not argue that we are innocent, but confessing our guilt, pleads for mercy to us; and he does not present *our* merits as a reason why mercy should be shown us, but *his* merits. "He is the propitiation for our sins." His atoning death does, as it were, render God propitious, or favorable to sinners. Not that God is unwilling to show favor to poor sinners, and only prevailed on to do so by the death and intercession of his Son. Oh no! far from it. "Herein is love," says John in the same Epistle, "not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." It was because God loved us, and wanted us to be saved, that he devised this way of saving us. And God is made propitious, favorable to us, not when he is made willing to save, but when it is made right that he should save us, and therefore we need not die, but may have everlasting life.

When a sinner is pardoned, simply for the sake of the atoning and interceding Saviour, there is in that no encouragement to God's creatures to sin, as if it were a little thing and could be readily passed over, but a most solemn and impressive exhibition of the dreadful evil of sin, since it was only through the atonement and intercession of the only-begotten Son of God that any sinner could be forgiven, an exhibition at once of God's love to the perishing, and of his justice, that "will by no means clear the guilty."

Bearing in mind the difference between the pleading of our great advocate and any parallel which human affairs presents, we may look at a story of Grecian history, which has been often used to illustrate the Saviour's intercession. The poet Aeschylus had incurred the displeasure of the Athenians. He was on trial before the great popular tribunal, consisting of many hundreds of citizens, and was about to be condemned. But Aeschylus had a brother, who had lost an arm in battle-in the great battle of Salamis, where the Greeks fought for their existence against the Persian aggressors. This brother came into the court, and did not speak words of entreaty, but letting fall his mantle, he showed the stump of his arm, lost in his country's defense, and there stood until the Athenians relented, and Aeschylus was suffered to go free. So, my brethren, imperfect and unworthy as is the illustration, so we may conceive that when we are about to be condemned, and justly condemned for our sins, our glorious Brother stands up in our behalf, and does not need to speak a word, but only to show where he was wounded on the cross,

*Five bleeding wounds he bears,
Received on Calvary;
They pour effectual prayers,
They strongly speak for me;
"Forgive him, O forgive," they cry,
"Nor let that ransomed sinner die!"*

Here, then, is hope for us. "If any man sin," much as he ought to deplore it, he need not despair. Our advocate with the Father ever liveth to make intercession for them that come unto God through him, and through him we may find mercy. And here is no encouragement to sin, but the very contrary. If

we truly trust in, truly love our interceding Lord, we shall be supremely anxious for his dear sake to turn from sin, to live for him who died for us; yea, who ever lives as our Saviour.

3. *This suggests another respect in which is seen our need of our Lord's perpetual intercession. We make such slow progress in attaining holiness-holiness, which is the noblest thing men can aspire to-holiness, "without which no man shall see the Lord."* Many a Christian, as he sorrowfully sees how often he yields to temptation, how his character breaks down afresh where he thought it had grown most firm, is at times inclined to think it impossible that he should ever become really holy.

But remember how Jesus prayed the night before his atoning death, "Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth." "I pray not that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil." Think you that he, who ever lives to intercede for his people, does not still pray this prayer, that they may be sanctified and kept from the evil? Do you doubt that he prays for them still, as he did when on earth? His people's wants have not changed, and as for him, he is "the same yesterday and today and forever." Find me a young man far from his home whose mother used to pray for him when they were together, and try to make him believe that she does not pray for him still. "No, no," he would say, "if she is living, she prays for me."

Brethren, he who prays for us "ever lives." When the Jews gathered at the temple on the great day of atonement, and the high priest went into the holy of holies to pray for the people and himself, did the people doubt whether he was praying? Why, for that very purpose he had withdrawn from their view. So for that very purpose our High Priest has entered "not into a holy place made with hands, like in pattern to the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear before the face of God for us." And do not say that the Jewish high priest was absent but a few minutes, while it is long since Jesus went away. On the scale of the ages it is but a little while since he entered the heavenly sanctuary, having "been once offered to bear the sins of many," and any moment he may "appear a second time apart from sin unto salvation." Let us be sure that while absent he perpetually carries on his work of intercession.

Think of him, then, as still praying, "Sanctify them in the truth. Keep them from the evil." In all our disheartening failures to keep good resolutions, even when we may be tempted to think it scarce worth while for us to try to be holy, let us remember that Jesus prays for us, and, "forgetting the things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, let us press toward the mark." Ah! brethren, though it might often seem to us the bitterest irony now for a man to call you and me the saints of the Lord, yet, if indeed we are in Christ, and thus are new creatures, we have but to trust in his intercession for the sanctifying Spirit, and earnestly strive to "grow in grace," and we shall make progress; yea, sadly imperfect as is now our conformity to the Saviour's beautiful image, "we know that when he shall appear we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." O burdened spirit, crying, "Wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" be sure to add, "I thank God, through Jesus Christ our Lord." The Saviour will continue to intercede, the Spirit will help your infirmities, and you shall at last be pure from sin, and safe from temptation to sin, a saint of the Lord forever.

4. *When we are in sorrow it is a blessed thing that Jesus ever lives to pray for us.* He was himself while on earth, "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." And he showed the truest, tenderest sympathy with the sorrows of others. Who does not think at once of that touching scene at Bethany? "Jesus wept," in affection for the departed, in sympathy with the bereaved. And presently, standing by the tomb, he said, "Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me." Then he had been praying, asking that he might be able to raise Lazarus from the dead. We do not expect him now to pray that miracles may be wrought in behalf of the bereaved. We do not expect him now to give back the buried brother

to his sisters, or to the widowed mother her only son. But shall it not be a consolation to us all in our afflictions, to feel assured that he now intercedes for us; that now, too, the Father hears him, and that by the gracious influences of the Holy Ghost, the Comforter, this affliction shall work for us glory? And though we cannot now see his tears, nor hear his loving voice, as did the mourners at Bethany, neither do we need to send a messenger many miles, and wait, day after day, and go forth into the suburbs to meet him; he is everywhere alike near, and ever ready to pray for us to his Father and our Father, to his God and our God.

5. *When we come to die, he is "alive forevermore."* One of his servants, when near to death, saw "heaven opened, and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God," where he represents and intercedes for his people. And so in departing he committed his spirit to him, as now exalted and glorious and ready to receive it. And so, amid all the cruel injustice and suffering, he was calm and forgiving. And so, though they were stoning him to death, "he fell asleep." Oh, whenever you are called to die, brother, and however, whether among loving friends in your pleasant home, or far away in loneliness and want, whether with ample forewarning or in the suddenness of a moment, think of your interceding Saviour standing on the right hand of God, and say, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," and you too shall fall asleep.

6. *Even this is not the end of his work for his people.* There shall be a "redemption of the body." Many have been sad during the time of war, because the bodies of their loved ones lie so far away, lie perhaps undistinguished among the huge masses of the unnamed dead. But he who receives the departing spirit to himself will also care for the mouldering body. His resurrection is a pledge of the glorious resurrection of his people. "If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also who through Jesus have fallen asleep, will God bring with him." "Who shall fashion anew the body of our humiliation, that it may be conformed to the body of his glory." Then, the spirit reunited with the risen and glorified body, "so shall we ever be with the Lord."

And he who saved them will be ever living to keep them safe, unto all eternity. My friends, how shall we think of Jesus? What conception shall we cherish of him whom "having not seen, we love," who ever liveth to intercede for us? Many centuries ago, on the eastern slope of Mount Olivet, toward Bethany, twelve men stood together, one talking to the others. Presently he lifted up his hands and blessed them; and with hands still uplifted, and words of blessing still lingering on his lips, he was parted from them and rose toward heaven, till a cloud received him out of sight. Years passed, and one of the eleven was an exile on a lonely island. It was the Lord's day, and he was in the Spirit. Hearing behind him a mighty voice that seemed to call him, he turned, and lo! one like unto the Son of Man, it was the Saviour who had parted from him long years before. He was arrayed in robes of majesty, and girt about with a golden girdle; his whole head shone white as snow with celestial glory; his eyes were as a flame of fire; and his feet like unto burnished brass, as if it had been refined in a furnace; and his voice as the voice of many waters; and his countenance as the sun shineth in his strength. Yes, the feet that once wearily trod the dusty roads of Judea now shone like molten brass. The eyes that were full of tears as he gazed upon doomed Jerusalem now gleamed as a flame of fire. The countenance that writhed in agony as he lay prostrate on his face in the garden, that was streaked with the blood that fell from his thorn-pierced brow, was now as the sun shineth in his strength. And the voice as the voice of many waters-it was the same voice that in gentleness and love had so often encouraged the sinful and sorrowing to draw near-it is the same voice that now calls us to come unto God through him, and declares that he is able to save us completely, since he ever lives to intercede for us.

O my hearer, slight all the sounds of earth, all the voices of the universe; be deaf to the thunder's

mighty tones, and stand careless amid "the wreck of matter and the crush of worlds"-but oh, slight not the loving voice of Jesus.

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