

THE MERCIES OF GOD: Intercession

“Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.” —*Hebrews 7:25*

“In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.” —*Romans 8:26*

Introduction

As we noted in the previous session (“Preservation,” 4/22/2020), God preserves to final salvation all those who have been regenerated by His Spirit and united with His Son. No one who is saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, is ever lost on the path to final glory (John 6:37-40; 10:27-29; 1 Cor 1:4-9; 1 Pet 1:3-5). As the Canons of Dort (1619) observed, if God left the preservation of faith in the hands of the believer, the believer would certainly lose it:

Thus, it is not in consequence of their own merits or strength, but of God’s free mercy, that they do not totally fall from faith and grace, nor continue and perish finally in their backslidings; which, with respect to themselves, is not only possible, but would undoubtedly happen. (Article 8, “Of the Perseverance of the Saints,” Canons of Dort)

But God ensures each believer’s preservation *through the use of means*. The triune God actively works to ensure that the faith of none of His elect would ever fail completely. The primary means by which this is achieved is through *the intercession of the Son and the Spirit*. In fact, the preservation of the saints cannot be sufficiently understood unless it is viewed in light of the doctrine of divine intercession. And yet, to the detriment of many Christians, this precious doctrine is often neglected. As Louis Berkhof writes,

Compared with the sacrificial work of Christ His ministry of intercession receives but little attention. Even in evangelical circles the impression is often given, though perhaps without intending it, that the work accomplished by the Savior on earth was far more important than the services which He now renders in heaven. (*Systematic Theology*, 401)

The neglect of the doctrine of divine intercession leads to the flawed perception that it is the believer’s own efforts, or at least his efforts to a significant degree, that will carry him over the finish line. Not only does this thinking rob many Christians of assurance of salvation, but it obscures the glorious work of God in the plan of redemption.

A. Key Terms and Definitions

Three terms or concepts are especially pertinent to any discussion about the doctrine of divine intercession.

1. **“Intercession.”** The English words “intercession/intercede” translate two related Greek verbs: (1) ἐντυγχάνω (*entynchanō*), which means **“to make an earnest request through contact with the person approached”**; and (2) its intensified form, ὑπερεντυγχάνω (*hyperentynchanō*), which means **“to intercede in behalf of another.”** In simple terms, the first verb means “to meet in,” while the second means “to mean in on behalf of.”

Both Greek verbs are used to describe **the current activity of the Holy Spirit** in the life of believers. As the Apostle Paul states in **Romans 8:26-27**, “In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to *the will of God*.”

The verb, ἐντυγχάνω (*entynchanō*), is used to describe **the current activity of Jesus Christ** in the life of believers: “Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us” (**Romans 8:33-34**); and “Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (**Hebrews 7:25**).

Key idea:
The Jesus and the Holy Spirit serve as “go-betweens” between for the Father and the believer.

2. **“Advocate/Helper.”** The Greek term *παράκλητος* (*paraklētos*) is translated as “advocate” or “helper.” From this Greek term we derive the word *Paraclete*, “one who is called to someone’s aid” or “one who appears in another’s behalf.” It refers to one who is “called alongside of” another person for assistance.

In one text, **Jesus uses the term to refer both to Him and to the Holy Spirit:** “I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever” (**John 14:16**). He calls the Holy Spirit *another* Helper (*Paraclete*), that is, another of the same kind that He Himself is. This term—“Helper”—then is used throughout Jesus’ Upper Room Discourse to refer to the Holy Spirit (**John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7**).

Key idea:
Jesus and the Holy Spirit are both called alongside the believer to provide him with personal assistance.

The term *παράκλητος* (*paraklētos*) is found in one other text, where it is translated as “advocate,” and where it refers explicitly to Jesus Christ: “My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (**1 John 2:1**).

3. **“High Priestly Ministry.”** The concepts of *intercession* and *advocacy* are closely tied to the function of *priests*—those who are called to stand as mediators between God and man. While the Holy Spirit is not called a priest, **Jesus Christ is specifically entitled “a great high priest” (Heb 4:14)**. The book of Hebrews emphasizes Jesus’ role as this high priest. He not only functioned as a high priest in offering up His own life as the ultimate sacrifice on behalf of His people, once and for all, but having done so He entered the heavenly Holy of Holies—the very presence of God—to take up His priestly duties as the great Intercessor for His people (see Heb 2:17-18; 5:5-10; 6:19-20; 8:1-6; etc.). It is for this reason that the writer of Hebrews states, “He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (7:25). In summarizing this high priestly ministry of Jesus, John Owen writes,

Key idea:
Jesus functions as the ultimate Prophet, Priest, and King. His intercession for the believer is part of His ministry as the ultimate Priest.

[Christ’s high priestly ministry is] his continual appearance for us in the presence of God, by virtue of his office as the ‘high priest over the house of God,’ representing the efficacy of his oblation [sacrifice], accompanied with tender care, love, and desires for the welfare, supply, deliverance, and salvation of the church. (*Exposition of Hebrews*, 5.541)

It is this ministry of Jesus Christ which renders the services of any other priest or human spiritual mediator unnecessary and contrary to God’s way of salvation.

B. Essential Characteristics

The following qualities are central to a proper understanding of the intercession made for believers:

1. **The ministry of intercession is performed by both the Son and the Spirit.** Connected to His role as “great high priest,” Jesus intercedes for believers *in heaven*. Romans 8:34 – “at the right hand of God; Hebrews 9:24 – “in the presence of God”; 1 John 2:1 – “with the Father.” Though this may seem far removed from the believer in his practical need for assistance, distance is no detriment. As Robert Murray M’Cheyne stated, “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.”

Connected to His indwelling presence (see “Indwelling,” 4/8/2020), the Holy Spirit intercedes for believers *within them*. In Romans 8:34 the Apostle Paul writes that He “helps our weakness,” using the verb for “helps” (*συναντιλαμβάνομαι*, *sunantilambanomai*) that indicates he “comes to the aid of.” As such, He meets the believer in the midst of his own weakness and need. Moreover, He intercedes “with groanings too deep for words.” In other words, He intercedes for us to the Father in prayers inaudible to the believer himself.

2. **The ministry of intercession guarantees our access to the Father.** The believer’s status is always unimpressive. He is *spiritual weak* (Rom 8:26), in *need of regular cleansing* from sin (1 John 1:9; 2:1), and *hunted by a powerful enemy* who knows where these weaknesses and failures lie (1 Pet 5:8; Rev 12:10). If left to himself, the believer would fall in defeat. But it is precisely for this reason that the Son and Spirit continually intercede for the believer—to ensure that he has direct and constant access to the One who is the Great Defender of His people and who has all the resources necessary for their preservation.

Thus, the Spirit prays the prayers on our behalf, which we ourselves do not know how to pray (Rom 8:26-27). The Son continually ensures that the entrance to the throne room of God, the precise place where we can find mercy and grace to help in time of need (Heb 4:14-16; 10:19-22). Together, the Spirit and the Son ensure a constant and direct line between the believer and the Father, even when the believer is weak and oblivious to such a privilege.

**“When we do not know what to pray for—yes, even when we pray for things that are not best for us—we need not despair, for we can depend on the Spirit’s ministry of perfect intercession ‘on our behalf.’”
—Douglas Moo, *Romans*, 526**

“Prayer as it comes from the saint is weak and languid; but when the arrow of a saint’s prayer is put into the bow of Christ’s intercession it pierces the throne of grace.” —Thomas Watson

- 3. The ministry of intercession is according to the will of the Father, not contrary to it.** It would be a serious error to think that the Spirit and the Son intercede for believers in order to propitiate or placate the wrath of the Father against the believer and his sin. Jesus already did that once and for all on the cross (see “Propitiation,” 10/23/2019). God’s righteous wrath has been fully satisfied (Rom 8:1, 31-34). Intercession need not imply the presence of wrath. Instead, it implies the existence of *need* on the part of the believer, and the presence of *supply* on the part of the Father. The Son and the Spirit connect the two.

It is the Father’s will to provide for, protect, and preserve the believer—however weak he may be. And, as 1 John 5:14-15 state, when prayers are offered according to the Father’s will, He always hears and He always answers *yes*. Thus, the Spirit and the Son petition for the spiritual resources the believer needs exactly according to the will of the Father, and He always delights to answer their requests.

- 4. The ministry of intercession is focused on each and every believer.** Before He even made atonement for sin on the cross, Jesus prayed for all who would ever believe: “I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; . . . Holy Father, keep them in Your name” (John 17:9, 11).

When all the texts which refer to the Spirit’s and the Son’s intercession are examined, they are clear in describing such intercession as applied to each and every believer. It is for all “the saints” (Rom 8:27). It is “for us” (Rom 8:34). It is for those “who draw near to God through Jesus” (Heb 7:25). It is for “anyone who sins” (1 John 2:1). *Anyone* who believes in Jesus instantly becomes the object of this divine ministry of intercession. No believer is left out.

- 5. The ministry of intercession continually applies the benefits of Christ’s sacrifice.** As the ultimate sacrifice, Christ offered Himself as a sacrifice “once for all” (Heb 7:27; 10:10); the payment for sin was complete. As the ultimate priest, Christ entered the presence of God “once for all” (Heb 9:12), to apply the finished work of his sacrifice continuously to all believers. Believers not only receive the benefit of Christ’s sacrifice at conversion; they continue to receive these benefits every day thereafter! As Berkhof (*Systematic Theology*, 402-403) states,

The fundamental point to remember is that the ministry of intercession should not be dissociated from the atonement, since they are but two aspects of the same redemptive work of Christ, and the two may be said to merge into one. . . . The intercessory work is, as has been said, simply the complement of His redemptive priestly work, and is therefore equal to it in extent. Christ intercedes for all those for whom He has made atonement, and for those only.

Thus, there is an indissoluble connection between the objects of Christ’s atonement and the objects of Christ’s intercession. Christ prayed for those whom the Father “has given” Him (John 17:9). Christ laid down His life as a sacrifice specifically for “His sheep” (John 10:11-30). Christ now “lives to make intercession for them” (Heb 7:23-28). Christ will save them “completely” (Heb 7:25). Those whom God gave to Him = those for whom He died = those for whom He intercedes = those whom He will glorify.

- 6. The ministry of intercession is based on the merits of the Intercessors, not on the merits of the one for which intercession is made.** Indeed, we must heed the exhortations to “draw near” (Heb 4:16; 10:19-22) because of what the Son and the Spirit accomplish for us. We must take advantage of the guaranteed access to the Father. But the success of the intercession of the Son and the Spirit never depends upon *our* spiritual

achievements. It is always successful because of *their* merits. The Son's intercession is accepted because of the merits of His perfect sacrifice (Heb 10:1-18) and perfect priesthood (Heb 2:17-18; 4:14-16; 7:23-25). The Spirit's intercession is accepted because of the merits of His knowledge and agreement with the Father (Rom 8:27). To his great benefit and consolation, the surety of the believer's preservation is not tied to his accomplishments, but to the achievements and merits of the perfect Son and Holy Spirit.

7. The ministry of intercession will never fail. The believer is totally covered and held secure by a power and determination that can never fail. The Son intercedes in heaven. The Spirit intercedes in the believer. They do so in complete harmony with the Father, who always grants their petitions. (For an example of the efficacy of such intercession, see the example of Simon Peter in Luke 22:31-32). The words of William Symington (1795-1862) summarize this truth well:

[Believers'] security springs not from anything naturally indestructible in the principle of the new life of which they are possessed, nor from any want of criminality in the sins they commit, nor from anything less dangerous in the circumstances in which they are placed, but wholly from the intercession of Christ. The principle of the new life may, in itself, be liable to decay, but Christ by his intercession will uphold it; their sins may deserve condemnation, but he intercedes for pardon; they may be openly exposed to danger, but his intercession interposes a shield of infallible protection. Not a sin can they commit for which his merits cannot secure forgiveness; not an accusation can be charged upon them which he has not skill to answer; not a temptation can assail them which he has not power to repel; not a service can they perform, however imperfect, to which he cannot give acceptance in the sight of God. Their final salvation is thus rendered absolutely secure, and in a spirit, not of haughty self-confidence, but of humble dependence on the Advocate with the Father, may they bid defiance to all opposition, and calmly trust that the gates of hell shall not prevail against them. (*On the Atonement and Intercession of Christ*, 391).

Practical Implications

The intercession of the Son and the Spirit is a doctrine which brings great encouragement to the believer. Many implications and applications arise out of it. Here are five:

1. The love of Christ and the Spirit is not theoretical or merely legal in nature. It is *personal and tender*.
2. Your prayers don't need to be perfect. The prayers of Christ and the Spirit are, and that's enough.
3. There is always hope in the worst moments of guilt. You have two Advocates who faithfully attend to your case.
4. You still need the achievements of the cross. They are being applied to your specific needs even now.
5. The triune God is far more committed to your preservation than you are.

For Further Reflection

Scripture Memory: Romans 8:26; Hebrews 7:25

Recommended Reading:

- MacArthur & Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, pages 253-254, 552-553.
- Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, "The Intercessory Work of Christ" (usually pages 400-404).
- Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, pages 626-628.
- James Rosscup, "The Spirit's Intercession," *Master's Seminary Journal* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 139-162.

Homework:

- In your own words, define the doctrine of divine intercession (the intercession of the Spirit and the Son).
- Read through the book of Hebrews this coming week (particularly, Hebrews 1:1-10:18). As you read, pay special attention to the nature of Jesus' high priestly ministry. Make a list of observations.
- Based on your review of this lesson, reflect upon the "Practical Implications" listed above and even add additional ones. Be ready to share this with others.
- Take time this week to sing through the two hymns listed below. Use these hymns to assist you in worship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for their amazing love and care for you.

Hymns: "Before the Throne of God Above" (*Hymns of Grace* #187); "Approach My Soul the Mercy Seat" (#414)

This Week's Audio: gracechurch.org/motw

Next Meeting: May 6 – "Assurance"