

**Marc Roby:** We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine Christology. Dr. Spencer, last time we covered the nature of Christ's sacrifice of atonement. His sacrifice paid the penalty we owe, it provided propitiation, it redeemed us from sin and it reconciled us to God. Are we ready to move on and discuss Christ's functioning as our Priest?

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we are. As we have said, a priest is a mediator. And we are told in 1 Timothy 2:5 that "there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus".<sup>1</sup>

**Marc Roby:** That verse doesn't, of course, negate the fact that there have been other mediators, like Moses. It simply means that there is one mediator, or priest, who is ultimate and continues forever.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's right. And let me begin our examination of how Christ functions as our priest by looking at Question 25 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which asks, "How does Christ execute the office of a priest?" And the answer is, "Christ executes 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."

This answer lists two ways in which Christ functions as our priest. And the first is that he once offered himself as a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice. In other words, he provided atonement for our sins as we discussed last time.

**Marc Roby:** And it is very important that he did this once. The Old Testament sacrifices were performed over and over again.

Dr. Spencer: That is a very important point. Jesus' sacrifice was the only one that was truly able to meet our needs. The book of Hebrews in the New Testament provides an extensive explanation of the differences between the Old Testament sacrificial system and the sacrifice of Christ.

**Marc Roby:** And there are many differences. To begin with, Christ was both the priest who offered the sacrifice and the sacrifice itself!

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that is a very important difference. In the Old Testament, only the high priest could enter the holy of holies where the ark of the covenant was kept, and he could only do that one day a year, on Yom Kippur, which means the Day of Atonement. And we are told in Leviticus 16:3-6 how the high priest had to prepare for this. The high priest at this time was Aaron, Moses' brother, and God gave the following instructions to him about the Day of Atonement: "This is how Aaron is to enter the sanctuary area: with a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. He is to put on the sacred linen tunic, with linen undergarments next to his body; he is to tie the linen sash around him and put on the linen

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turban. These are sacred garments; so he must bathe himself with water before he puts them on. From the Israelite community he is to take two male goats for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. Aaron is to offer the bull for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household.”

**Marc Roby: You get a very clear impression of how solemn this duty was.**

Dr. Spencer: You absolutely do. It was the most important day of the year then, and it is still the most important day of the year for practicing Jews, although they no longer offer these sacrifices. But notice that Aaron began by offering a bull to make atonement for his own sin and the sin of his household. Aaron, along with every other high priest outside of Christ, was a sinner and could not atone for the sin of anyone.

In stark contrast, Jesus Christ is the perfect, sinless high priest. We are told about him in Hebrews 7:27, where we read, “Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.”

**Marc Roby: That’s truly wonderful. Aaron had to first sacrifice for himself, and then, after he had atoned for his own sin, he sacrificed one of the two goats for the sins of the people and then released the other goat, called the scapegoat, into the wilderness, which symbolized the removal of the sins of the people. But these sacrifices had to be repeated every year.**

Dr. Spencer: And we are told in Hebrews that all of these things were only a shadow of the reality. For example, in Hebrews 10:1-4 we read that “The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.”

**Marc Roby: The logic of that argument is inescapable. If the offerings made by Aaron and his descendants had been efficacious, they would have stopped! We also see this word “shadow” in Hebrews 8:5 where we are told that Aaron and his descendants “serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven.”**

Dr. Spencer: The entire Old Testament sacrificial system pointed forward to Jesus Christ and the one, final efficacious sacrifice that would take away the sins of all of God’s people once and for all. In his commentary on the book of Hebrews, the Rev. P.G. Mathew wrote, “The time of shadow is over and the age of reality has come in Jesus Christ. It is foolish to yearn for symbols, vestments, incense, candles, gold, silver, Gothic structure, and the clergy-laity distinction. Away with such carnal things! We have a high priest seated in heaven who ministers in the heavenly, God-built sanctuary.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> P.G. Mathew, *Muscular Christianity*, Grace and Glory Ministries, 2010, pg. 174

Marc Roby: What a glorious thought! Our high priest is seated in heaven and ministers there. And, of course, when Rev. Mathew talks about “symbols, vestments, incense” and so on he is referring to the Roman Catholic church and other churches that still hold to the idea of our needing human priests and rituals to communicate with God.

Dr. Spencer: And for those listeners who may not know, the Roman Catholic mass *is* a sacrifice! They believe that when the priest blesses the bread and the wine they actually become, in their essence, but not in their outward appearance, the body and blood of Christ, and that the Lord’s Supper is truly a sacrifice of Christ. And yet, we read Hebrews 7:27 a couple of minutes ago, which says that Christ “sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.” In addition, in Hebrews 9:12 we are told that Christ “did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.” And in Hebrews 9:28 we read that “Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people”, and in Hebrews 10:10 we are told that “we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”

Marc Roby: Yes, that is about as clear as it can get. And we also read about Christ’s sacrificial death in Romans 6:10, which says that “The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.” And again, in 1 Peter 3:18 the apostle Peter tells us that “Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.”

Dr. Spencer: That is an extremely important point. It is one of the fundamental errors of the Roman Catholic church. It isn’t as important as their unbiblical view of justification, but it is nonetheless a very serious error. The Lord’s Supper is a *commemoration* of Christ’s sacrifice. It is an important and solemn event, but it is *not* a sacrifice. Jesus himself commanded us, in 1 Corinthians 11:24-25, to “do this in remembrance of me.”

But, let’s get back to discussing the priestly office of Christ.

Marc Roby: I do think we’ve strayed off topic a bit, although it was an important diversion.

Dr. Spencer: It definitely is important. We have made the point that Christ is our final, unique, high Priest. The book of Hebrews spends a great deal of time explaining the many ways in which the priesthood of Christ is unique. He was, as we have already shown, sinless and did not need to sacrifice for himself. But he was also unique in that he was not a Levite like Aaron and all of the other Old Testament priests. In his human nature Christ was a descendant of Judah, one of Levi’s brothers.

Marc Roby: And so, in Hebrews 7:14 we read that “it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.”

Dr. Spencer: In fact, that whole section of Hebrews labors to make the distinction between the Levitical priesthood and Christ. In Hebrews 7:11 we are told that “If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come—one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron?”

Marc Roby: And this Melchizedek that the writer of Hebrews refers to is an enigmatic figure in the Old Testament. In fact, he is only mentioned twice. The first reference is in Genesis 14 where we read about Abraham's nephew Lot being taken captive and Abraham rescuing him along with many other people. Abraham was still called Abram at this point in time and as they returned from the battle, we are told in Genesis 14:18-19 that "Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram".

Dr. Spencer: As you said, that is an enigmatic passage. And Melchizedek is only mentioned one other time in the Old Testament. In Psalm 110, which was recognized as Messianic even by the Jews before the time of Christ,<sup>3</sup> we see Jehovah speaking to the Messiah and in Verse 4 we are told that Jehovah, "has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.'"

Marc Roby: And it is only in the book of Hebrews that we find an explanation of what this means.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. We learn more about Melchizedek in Hebrews Chapter 7. In Verse 3 we are told that "Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God he remains a priest forever." And then, in Verses 6 and 7 we're told that he was greater than Abraham! We are also told, in Verse 12, that "when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law." And then the verse we read from Psalm 110 is quoted twice in making the point that Jesus is the one who is "a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek." Then, in Verse 22, we are told that "Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant."

Marc Roby: Well, I don't think that this clears up all of the mystery, but it certainly makes clear that God was doing something new when he sent Jesus Christ. The old sacrificial system was fulfilled and the priesthood became unnecessary because Jesus came as the final high priest, and he offered the only efficacious sacrifice for his people, himself!

Dr. Spencer: And that is the second thing that is unique about Christ's priestly service. He didn't offer some animal, he offered himself as the sacrifice. We read in Hebrews 10:4 that "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." And then, a few verses later in Hebrews 10:12-14, we read that "when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy."

Marc Roby: What a great picture that is! Jesus sat down because his work of redemption was finished.

Dr. Spencer: That is a wonderful fact to meditate on. Our salvation is certain. The work is finished and the war, if you will, has already been won. We have to do our part, but there is no

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<sup>3</sup> E.g., see the study note on Psalm 110 in the NIV Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible, Zondervan, 2003, pg. 926

uncertainty about the outcome. God has more work to do in each one of us, but Christ has finished his work of redemption.

**Marc Roby: But that does not mean that he is done acting as our high priest.**

Dr. Spencer: No, it doesn't. In Hebrews 7:24-25 we are told that "because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them." And that takes us to the second part of the Westminster Shorter Catechism's statement about how Christ executes the office of a priest.

**Marc Roby: And to help us all remember, the answer to Question 25 says that "Christ executes 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."**

Dr. Spencer: And while the first part of that answer is certainly the most important because without the sacrifice of Christ we cannot be saved, the second part is also important. Wayne Grudem argues persuasively that Christ's intercession does not just mean that he remains in the Father's presence as a reminder that he has paid the penalty we owe.<sup>4</sup> His intercession is much more active than that. The Greek word speaks of petitioning or pleading the case of another person. The same Greek word is also used in Romans 8:34 where Paul writes, "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." No one can condemn us before God. Not because we are not, in ourselves, guilty of any offense, but because Jesus Christ has paid the penalty and is actively petitioning the Father on our behalf.

**Marc Roby: Now, we must again guard against any notion that the Father is somehow reluctant in granting the petitions however. It isn't that the Father doesn't love us or that he wants to do us harm and Jesus has to try and change his mind.**

Dr. Spencer: No, of course that isn't the case. We made the point last week that it is God the Father who so loved the world that he gave his only Son to save his people. But, in God's glorious plan of salvation it is Jesus Christ who is the only mediator between God and men. He is the unique God-man. And we should be immensely grateful that God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – loved us enough to save us and provide for us in this way.

**Marc Roby: We see a glorious example of Christ's intercessory prayer for his people in the case of the apostle Peter. In Luke 22:31-32 Jesus told Peter, who was also known by the name Simon, "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."**

Dr. Spencer: That is a wonderful example. Note that Christ doesn't say "And if you turn back"! He knew his prayer was effectual and so he said, "And when you have turned back". And we all know the story. Peter did deny Christ three times, but he repented and Christ restored him.

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<sup>4</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 627 (incl. fn 4)

Marc Roby: And he also learned a valuable lesson to not rely on his own strength.

Dr. Spencer: That is a lesson we all need to learn. If we try to serve God in our own strength, we too will fail. As Christ told us in John 15:5, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”

Marc Roby: And, praise God, the converse is also true! Paul tells us in Philippians 4:13 that “I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we must remember that we need God always. Not just at the point of paying the penalty for our sins, but day by day and moment by moment we need him to help us live holy lives. And Jesus Christ is our faithful high priest, able and willing to help us every step of the way. He promised us, in Matthew 28:20, that “surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Marc Roby: And that is a great place to end today. Let me take this opportunity remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org), and we will answer as best we can.