

The Intercession of Christ

Zechariah 3

3 Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. ² And the Lord said to Satan, “The Lord rebuke you, O Satan! The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this a brand plucked from the fire?”³ Now Joshua was standing before the angel, clothed with filthy garments.⁴ And the angel said to those who were standing before him, “Remove the filthy garments from him.” And to him he said, “Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments.”⁵ And I said, “Let them put a clean turban on his head.” So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments. And the angel of the Lord was standing by.⁶ And the angel of the Lord solemnly assured Joshua, ⁷ “Thus says the Lord of hosts: If you will walk in my ways and keep my charge, then you shall rule my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you the right of access among those who are standing here.”⁸ Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, you and your friends who sit before you, for they are men who are a sign: behold, I will bring my servant the Branch.⁹ For behold, on the stone that I have set before Joshua, on a single stone with seven eyes, I will engrave its inscription, declares the Lord of hosts, and I will remove the iniquity of this land in a single day.¹⁰ In that day, declares the Lord of hosts, every one of you will invite his neighbor to come under his vine and under his fig tree.”

Intro: Mother Martha is struggling. She feels like she can barely keep up with the house and kids, but watches on social media as Mom #2, let's call her pioneer Patty, shares updates about her life on social media. With the hashtag #prov31, pioneer Patty posts about her daily wins. Those 12 kids she had at home with no epidurals have their schoolwork done by noon to help the self-sustaining household. All her children are at the top of their homeschooling class, with the 4 year old now able to write the alphabet in Latin. Martha mom groans inside as pioneer Patty shows pictures of the typical dinner meal that looks like a Thanksgiving feast, with all the children wearing the clothes she made from scratch. When dad gets home, Martha mom winces as he asks her what she did all day and why the house is messy. Pioneer Patty's husband never seems to have that problem, as the house is spotless and the children politely sit in silence at the dinner table until they are excused to wash dishes.

Martha mom struggles to stay up past 8, feeling depleted from chasing her 2 children around all day and cleaning up after them. Pioneer Patty heads to bed around 11, after a few hours of house cleaning and studying theology.

Even with the exaggeration, I'm sure many of you can relate to some of those feelings. Mothers in particular can struggle with the challenges of comparison, and the feeling of not measuring up. Mothers face unique challenges as they serve little self-centered people at home who don't often thank them in return. They see the world going by, but can often feel disconnected from it. Oh, what they would give for someone to help them. Now, our text today isn't mom specific. It applies to everyone. However, given that it is Mother's Day, I will make specific application to mom's in greater measure. **The main point that we will see today is that the intercession of Jesus Christ provides us with acceptance, confidence, and blessing.** More than a nice meal after church, more than obedient children, and even more than a spouse who loves us, we need the ongoing intercession of Jesus. But despite its importance, the intercession of Christ is often overlooked and ignored.

What is the intercession of Christ?

- The intercession of Christ describes Christ's ongoing work on our behalf. We often focus on what Christ has done for us-his death, sinless life, and resurrection to save us. But what is Christ doing for us right now? He is interceding.
- To intercede is when a 3rd party comes between 2 parties on behalf of them both. God the Father is one party, we are another. It's Jesus Christ who serves as the intercessor for his people.
- We may wonder "why" we need intercession. Isn't the finished work of Christ completed for us? What more is Jesus offering for our salvation? Jesus is adding nothing more his finished work. But salvation is personal, not some mechanical process. The intercession of Christ reflects the love that Christ has for us.

Why is the intercession of Christ necessary and important?

- The intercession of Christ protects us from temptation and accusations of the evil one.
- The doctrine of Christ's intercession is one of the most comforting and encouraging doctrines of the Christian faith. Robert Murray M'Cheyne (1813–1843) resolved, "I ought to study Christ as an Intercessor.... If I could hear Christ praying for me in the next room, I would not fear a million of enemies. Yet the distance makes no difference; He is praying for me."
- How many of us have said, that if Jesus was right here with us, that we would not be afraid of anything, or do anything that he asked? Yet, even though he is interceding for us, we act as if he is a billion miles away. But distance makes no difference to God.
- We need an intercessor because God is holy and we are not. We need an intercessor because we have an adversary who is continually trying to accuse us before the Father.

The Intercession of Christ in a small book

- Zech. 3 helps us to see and understand the intercessor we have for us. Zechariah is the Revelation of the Old Testament. It's a highly symbolic book that addresses the discouragement and discontentment that Israel was facing, after the return from the exile.
- The temple was started, but was stopped by opposition from enemies. There were high taxes. The people thought this "was a day of small things (4:10)", and it didn't seem like God was there. It felt useless to obey and serve God, because there was no evidence of his reward for this obedience. It seemed to make more sense to "live your best life now," in light of the present challenges.
- Zechariah, a prophet as well as a priest, writes to encourage the people and remind them that God is still at work, even if they didn't see it. God would remove all their sin from the land (3:8-10). He promised a branch, the promised Davidic King, who would bring peace, harmony, and prosperity. But there is a challenge: the sin in the land needs to be removed. Not just temporarily, but permanently. How will this happen? Through the work of a coming priest. In the midst of the people's sins, they need a better intercessor than they have had in the past.
- This passage reminds us of who the fight is against-not flesh and blood, but against an unseen enemy. It reminds us as well the solution is right at hand-the intercession of Christ.

The Scene:

- The setting of chapter 3 is the heavenly courtroom. Joshua, the defendant, comes with polluted clothes. He pictures not only himself, but also sinful Judah. If the high priest is so filthy, how much more the nation as a whole?

- The angel of the Lord represents God's interests in the case. Satan functions as the prosecutor in the trial. Satan is accusing Joshua's in committing crimes against the Lord. These transgressions disqualified the priest from divine service.
- The setting in Zech 3 bears a striking resemblance to the heavenly courtroom in Job 1 where Satan accused Job before God. However, the overwhelming guilt of Joshua, contrasted with Job's innocence, displays the main difference between Zech 3 and Job 1.
- Joshua is not the Joshua in the book of Joshua. Zechariah takes place hundreds of years later. This Joshua that we see here appears in Ezra and Nehemiah. His name means "Yahweh saves."

The Sin:

- Joshua and the angel of the Lord are not the only ones in the courtroom. Satan, whose name means the Accuser, enters the scene. Satan's role is to disqualify and discredit God's servants by accusing them of their sinfulness and defilement. Satan wants to make sure all heaven knows that we are unfit for God's presence.
- Satan had a good case. He has plenty of reason to discredit the high priest Joshua, the one who was to represent God's people, and to intercede for them. If he can disqualify the intercessor, then the people will be cut off from access to the Lord. Joshua comes into the courtroom as verse 3 indicates, with filthy garments.
- There are few verses in the OT that paint such a smelly and gross scene as verse 3. Throughout the Old Testament, clothing symbolizes a person's office. Royal robes rest upon kings (1 Kgs 22:10). Prophets cloak themselves in their mantles (1 Kgs 19:19). Priests wear certain clothes (Exod 28-29). Who could fathom a priest preparing to lead in worship while wearing filthy, desecrated garments?
- The Old Testament gives significant attention to the manner in which priests conducted their duties. For instance, biblical law mandated that Aaron and his descendants serve the Lord while ceremonially clean and clothed according to divine decree (Lev 8:5-9). Joshua was supposed to be wearing the required priestly vestments in order to lead worship in a manner that would be acceptable to the Lord.
- However, Joshua stands humiliated before the angel, and presumably the Lord as well, wearing poop-covered priestly raiment. The Hebrew word clearly conveys that his clothes were not simply dirty from mud, dust, or sweat. Joshua comes in with, as we would say to our children, poopy pants.
- Satan then has a legitimate case against Joshua. He has real grounds to accuse him. Lev 22 lay out the manner in which priests conducted their duties, and v. 3 cautions: "If any of your descendants is ceremonially unclean and yet comes near the sacred offerings that the Israelites consecrate to the Lord, that person must be cut off from my presence. I am the Lord." Zechariah 3:3 presents Joshua as utterly defiled, standing in the Lord's court in an official capacity, a transgressor who came before the Lord unworthily by violating Lev 22:3. Joshua's defiled condition contrasts sharply with the holy splendor of the Lord and his heavenly court.
- As we have said, Joshua represents God's people. They are polluted and dirty because of their sins. They stink to high heaven. The problem that Joshua and the people face is "How can a holy and righteous God bless them and have a relationship with them?" Any human efforts to earn this right standing and relationship with God stink. This question is not only the question of Zechariah, it is also the question of the Bible.

The Savior:

- Notice who is in charge in God's courtroom. It's not Satan, the accuser. God is in charge. Satan doesn't even get a word out. Even before he can, he is rebuked. This rebuke is not a light correction-it is a divine curse that threatens God's anger.
- It's good for us to remember who is in charge in God's courtroom. It's good for us to remember who controls what happens. We don't have an out of control heavenly courtroom where someone else other than God is running the show. No, we have a courtroom where God is perfectly in control.
- The Lord rebukes Satan by reminding him that God chose his people. God wants them. God has always wanted them, and will forever want them. What an amazing thought-the God of the universe wants you.
- Joshua is described as a brand plucked from the fire. The phrase "a burning brand" (or stick) snatched from the fire" echoes Amos 4:11, which states, "I overthrew some of you as I overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah. You were like a burning stick snatched from the fire." Just as the Lord plucked Lot from the burning brimstone falling on Sodom and Gomorrah, so had the Lord delivered Joshua and the people of God he represented from the burning judgment of the exile.
- Notice that Joshua does nothing to act. He doesn't take off his filthy clothes. He can't clean himself up. The angel of the Lord, under the Lord's direction, gives the order-take the filthy garments from him.
- **Story of brother breaking window-need for assistance outside of self**
- Upon removing his clothes, the angel explains the significance. The filthy clothes represent the filthy, sinful state Joshua and the people are in. But the Lord intercedes-by taking away the filthy clothes, and suppling new ones. In other words, the Lord gives Joshua and the people a new set of righteous garments.
- Joshua receives not any set of clothes, not some second hand ones that were passed down. He is divinely clothed with pure, rich garments. The word translated "rich" only occurs here and in Isa 3:22. The Hebrew word describes "especially fine, white garments." Typically, the Old Testament describes priestly clothing as "holy" garments, not the "rich" garments.
- We see the biblical picture here of Christ's intercessory work: the Lord covers people with garments of salvation and a robe of righteousness. Now, Joshua and the people are forgiven and cleansed. At the same time, this forgiveness and cleansing points to a future work of intercession that will be similar, yet different, from this cleaning that we see here.
- Until now, Zechariah has been quiet. Now, he is compelled to speak. "And I said, "Let them put a clean turban on his head." So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments." The priestly hat normally worn by priests bore the inscription, "Holy to the Lord" (Exod 28:36; 39:30).
- Satan was rebuked even more by the clean clothes and cap given to Joshua. Joshua, coming in dirty, comes away clean and with a crown on his head. None of this would have happened apart from the intercession of Christ.
- Joshua is then given a great promise, but it is contingent upon the high priest fulfilling 2 requirements: "if you will walk in my ways and keep my requirements." Before the High Priest can minister on behalf of others, his own personal spiritual life must be right. Secondly, he must faithfully obey the duties the Lord has laid out for him. The priest must blamelessly walk with the Lord and carry out all the commandments. If he does, he will have direct access to the throne of God.

- The problem with this, that you might see, is the difficulty. How is one to obey so perfectly? The problem in the OT is that none can—at least to the degree that is required. Furthermore, even if they could or did, at some point they would die, and another would need to take their place, and do the same thing.
- The Lord provides hope-by pointing to a coming branch. Branch is one of the most common messianic titles. Consider what Jer. 23:5-6 says: ““The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called The Lord Our Righteousness” (Jer 23:5–6).
- This branch will remove the iniquities of the land in a single day. This branch will be a better high priest than the current one. He will remove all their iniquities, forever and permanently. And, he will continue to do this eternally. By now, I think you see where Zechariah fits in. He is not the high priest needed. But he does point to the coming high priest who will do this for all time.
- It’s at this point that we look at what other parts of the NT say in regards to Christ’s intercession, and the nature of it.

How does Jesus provide intercession?

1. Jesus provides holy intercession:

Hebrews 4: Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need.

- The holiness of Christ’s intercession gives us confidence that his motives are pure, and that he can have full access to the Father. Unlike the corrupt religious leaders of Christ’s time, his motives were always perfect and pure. We never have to worry that Jesus is lacking in love and care towards us. No, his motives and actions are always perfect and pure, because he is without sin.
- 2. **Jesus provides heavenly intercession.** “*Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens..*”
- While it is good to have friends and others who intercede for us, none of them can intercede like Jesus can. What higher place could one go than the right hand of the Father in heaven to intercede? Often, people will seek to involve high ranking officials with more authority and weight than they have, in order to help them in their case. Here in America, we could say there would be no greater human authority to intercede for us than the president. Yet, Christ provides a far higher intercession. Only one who is supremely qualified could take this place.

3. Jesus provides continual intercession

How so?

- **He continually prays for believers**

Hebrews 7:25 Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

- **He continually defends believers**

Romans 8:34 Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

- **He continually lives to intercede for believers:**

Hebrews 7:²⁴ but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. ²⁵ Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

4. Jesus provides unified intercession.

- It is utterly mistaken to picture God the Father standing over us in judgment and wrath, while the Son, far more loving and approachable, pleads with the Father, and finally the Father gives in begrudgingly. The cross was the work of the Triune God, with the planning of the Father, the willingness of the Son, and through the effectiveness of the Spirit. There was absolutely no division or conflict between the Father and Son over the plan of redemption.
- What this means is that we can't view Christ's intercession as a desperate pleading for something the Father doesn't want to do. Neither is this intercession a reminder to the Father of something he forgets. The intercession of Christ was part of God's redemptive plan from the beginning to secure sinners.

5. Jesus provides powerful and protective intercession.

- Christ's intercession frees us from the legal demands and condemnation that our sin has place on us. *As Romans 8:33-34 explain, "33 Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us"*
- Thanks to Christ's intercession, we have a legal ruling on our behalf. Perhaps you know someone in a situation where they were in a dispute. Eventually, it needed to be settled in a legal setting with a legal verdict.
- Christ's intercession defeats the saints' great "accuser," Satan, "*who accuses them day and night before our God*" (Rev. 12:10). His intercession has great power—who else could intercede like this?
- How is it that Satan is defeated? Not by us. But by the work and intercession of Jesus Christ. Satan cannot overcome the intercession of Jesus. No matter how hard he tries, or how creative he is, or how much he spies on you, he cannot defeat Christ's intercession.
- Friends, know this today. Even though Satan is waging war against you, he cannot defeat the intercession efforts of Jesus Christ. He loves that you feel weighted down in guilt. But in God's courtroom against you, he cannot even get a word out!

6. Jesus provides perfect and complete intercession.

Heb. 10:¹¹ And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³ waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. ¹⁴ For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds," then he adds, "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more." Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

- The intercession of Jesus is complete. There is nothing that needs added to it. The intercession of Jesus is to the uttermost. Heb. 7:²⁵ *Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.*

- “To the uttermost” carries the ideas of “completely” and “always.” Because Jesus lives forever, he is able to save his people all the way. He will lose none of them. He does not get them almost there, and then hope they can finish on their own. No, he saves them all the way.
- “Able to save” does not mean that Jesus can potentially save. It carries the assurance of salvation. Who do we cling to then? Dead people and priests can’t save. Only a living one can. Is there something you are trying to add to Christ’s intercession? There’s nothing else you can.

7. Jesus provides personal and compassionate intercession.

- As you know, leaders often delegate duties to others. It could be things they don’t want to do, or don’t have time to do. Or things that they don’t need to do because others are qualified for them. But Jesus does not delegate his intercession. There are no believers in heaven, or his mother Mary, who are interceding on behalf of us. Jesus does the work himself.
- *“By his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us” (9:12).* Not another’s blood, but his own blood. This work is too important for delegation. In addition, no one else is qualified for it.
- Other religions speak of impersonal gods, gods who do not concern themselves with the affairs of humanity. But Jesus himself appears before the Father, standing in our place for us. Friend, when was the last time you thought of Jesus himself standing in your place? Your place. Not just someone else’s place, but your place. He takes the time to stand in your place. His schedule is not too busy to fit you in. And, he does this forever, without end.
- His intercession is also compassionate. *Hebrews 2:17-18 says, ¹⁷ Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.*
- Jesus is merciful in his intercession. He knows what it is like to be tempted and to suffer, because he experienced temptation as well. Jesus knows what it is like to be despised. Ignored. Taken for granted. Hated. Spit at. Attacked. He knows what it’s like to lose loved ones. To see death separate relationships.
- Because of Christ’s intercession, God relates to us in compassion.

8. Jesus provides a one of a kind intercession.

- The intercession that Jesus gives is different from any other kind. It’s true that other people and friends can pray for us, but only Jesus is perfect and obtains results. Only Jesus offers authorized intercession.
- We do not need to pray to the saints who have died, nor should we. We have the same access to the Father through Jesus as they do. We have the perfect mediator, why would there be any need for another?
- As the Belgic Confession (Art. 26) says, “Whom could we find who loved us more than He who laid down His life for us, even when we were His enemies? And if we seek for one who hath power and majesty, who is there that hath so much of both as He who sits at the right hand of His Father, and who hath all power in heaven and on earth?”

Why does Christ’s intercession matter?

- You may still be wondering why Christ’s intercession matters. Or, you may have objections to it. Yes, it’s wonderful that Christ intercedes for me, but I’m still discouraged. I love these words of William Bridge:

“Perhaps you will complain, saying, “Oh, but I am very tempted and cannot pray.” Be humbled for it, yet know this: that when you cannot pray, Christ prays for you. And he prays that you might pray. Perhaps you will complain, saying, “Oh, but I labor under such and such corruptions, and the devil is busy with me, exceedingly busy, and I cannot overcome them. And the devil stands at my right hand to tempt me and lead me into such and such sins. Well, even if it be so, the Lord Jesus is at the right hand of our Father. He has sat down at the right hand of God the Father till all his enemies are to be made his footstool. And your sins are his enemies. Therefore be of good comfort, all you people of the Lord. Is there ever a poor myrtle tree in a hollow-a soul that grows in a poor dark condition? Be of good comfort, the Lord Jesus Christ, our Great High Priest, has entered into heaven, into the most holy place, to intercede with God the Father for you.”

- So why does Christ’s intercession matter? In particular, there are several reasons.
- 1. **Our acceptance:** On what basis will you and I be accepted by Jesus Christ? On the basis of his work. The intercession of Christ provides the basis for our acceptance. Mothers, in particular, can struggle with a works-oriented mindset-trying to earn or prove their acceptance by the things they do. Moms, it’s Christ’s intercession that guarantees you are accepted. And his acceptance is worth more than anyone else’s, including your husbands. His acceptance is not based on how clean your house is, how many toys are on the floor, what preschool your kids got into, or how well your kids compare to your friends.
- 2. **Our confidence:** Our sins and struggles weigh us down. They destroy our confidence that we have been forgiven and accepted by the Father. They threaten our perception of God’s divine love for us. Christ’s intercession challenges these thoughts and the guilt we face.
- 3. **Our blessings:**
 - One of the great functions of a priest was to pronounce God’s blessing, or benediction, upon his people. Jesus blesses his people. Just before Christ ascended into heaven, “he lifted up his hands, and blessed” his disciples (Luke 24:50–51). The core elements of this priestly blessing, “grace” and “peace,” now flow from the Father and the Son to his people, as the greetings in the New Testament Epistles abundantly affirm.