

“No biblical or theological subject captivates my heart and stimulates my mind more than the glory of Christ. One day every knee will bow at the mention of his name. If you want to understand why (and have your own heart humbled, filled with gratitude, and aroused to worship), nourish your soul with this simple yet profound overview of who Jesus is and what he has accomplished.”

John MacArthur, Pastor, Grace Community Church; President,
The Master’s College and Seminary; speaker, *Grace to You*

“As Christians, we find it easy to talk about God’s work in our communities and around the world. It’s easy to describe our growth in Christ and what we are learning from him. But how many of us simply delight in talking about Jesus? The art of contemplating the loveliness of Christ—and infusing those admirations into everyday conversation—is a dying discipline. But in *Name above All Names*, my friends Alistair Begg and Sinclair Ferguson invite us to meditate afresh on our wonderful Savior and all that makes him beautiful and praiseworthy. I highly recommend this remarkable volume!”

Joni Eareckson Tada, founder and CEO, Joni and Friends International
Disability Center

“Who is Jesus? There is no more important question human beings can face. Alistair Begg and Sinclair Ferguson provide a wealth of knowledge about Christ by looking at how Christ is presented in the New Testament through a collection of exquisite images. Every Christian will celebrate this book as these two gifted authors bring us into an even deeper understanding of who Christ is and who he is for us.”

R. Albert Mohler Jr., President, The Southern Baptist Theological
Seminary

“You can’t have too many good books about the person and work of Jesus Christ. And this is a great book. Alistair Begg and Sinclair Ferguson handle the most important doctrines of the faith with clarity, fidelity, pastoral insight, and good humor. New Christians, non-Christians, and long-time Christians will benefit from these superb expositions.”

Kevin DeYoung, Senior Pastor, University Reformed Church, East
Lansing, Michigan

“For all those who, like me, have spent a lifetime in church hearing the Bible stories but have only begun to grasp the central story of the Bible, *Name above All Names* winsomely and clearly connects the dots. Two wise guides help us to see Jesus throughout the Scriptures—from the promise of his coming as the seed of the woman in Genesis to the promise of his coming again as the Lamb on the throne in Revelation.”

Nancy Guthrie, Bible teacher; author, *Seeing Jesus in the Old Testament* series

N A M E

above All

N A M E S



ALISTAIR BEGG AND
SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

■ ■ CROSSWAY
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

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Preface



This book, as its title suggests, is a brief exposition of what Christians often refer to as “the person and work of Christ.” Its focus is on some of the different ways in which the Bible portrays Christ’s identity and describes his ministry. The chapters are by no means exhaustive. They cover only seven of the many descriptions of Jesus found in the Bible, and none of those descriptions is treated exhaustively. So these pages are meant as a taster, a beginning exploration. Our joint prayer is that they will help some who are not yet Christians, be an eye-opener to those who already are, serve as an encouragement for mature believers, and be a pleasure for all who love Christ.

We cannot claim that this is a “special” book. But there are two special things about it that may lend interest to reading it.

For one thing, it is a concrete expression of a friendship, begun in the 1970s when we were both very young ministers in Scotland, that now spans five decades. We were born and lived the first years of our lives in the same city. We knew the same places, were taught the same psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, heard the same preachers, developed a network of mutual friends, and, yes, even supported the same soccer team and played on some of the same golf courses. We both came to minister in the United States within a few months of each other, in 1983.

Of course we are different personalities and live within our

own worlds (one has become an American citizen, the other hasn't; one plays the guitar, the other doesn't; one is a Baptist, the other a Presbyterian; one lives in Cleveland, the other in Columbia; and so on). We both have our own circle of friends as well as intersecting circles of friends. But over these many years we have enjoyed the kind of friendship, esteem, and affection for one another that has made us feel we are brothers. One of us never had a brother; the other lost his brother. So in part this book and its theme are expressions of our joint gratitude to the Savior in whom we have enjoyed such friendship and the love for his people we share in common.

But in addition, *Name above All Names* gives us the opportunity to do something we have talked about over the years: express in some tangible way our joint gratitude for Derek Prime, who has been to us model pastor, friend, and encourager. That would be true especially for Alistair who served with Derek Prime at Charlotte Chapel, Edinburgh, from 1974–1976. Our sense of gratitude for the measure of Christ-centeredness and Christlikeness we have seen displayed in his life and ministry makes it very natural for us to dedicate to him this little book on our Savior and Lord.

The material in these pages began to come together in its present form as we prepared for a conference at The Second Presbyterian Church in Memphis, Tennessee. We are indebted to that congregation and to its senior minister, Sandy Willson, for giving us the opportunity to serve them together and to share some of the material here in spoken form. We are also indebted to Mrs. Eve Huffman for the secretarial help without which this project would never have been completed.

We hope these pages will encourage, instruct, refresh, and challenge every reader. In order to make it more practically helpful to those with only a beginning knowledge of the Bible, we have included references to the Bible passages or texts to which we refer. These references are in footnotes so that the book may be read without the constant interruption of bracketed material.

We ask one favor from our readers. Standing in various pulpits in our native land of Scotland we have often seen words visible to the preacher but hidden from the congregation: “Sir, we wish to see Jesus” (John 12:21). We ask you to make that your prayer as you begin to turn these pages.

Alistair Begg
Sinclair B. Ferguson

Jesus Christ, the Great High Priest



Sometimes—especially in the United States—people will unintentionally invade our private space just a little by asking, “Do you have a life verse?” We understand what they mean: “Is there a text in Scripture that has been a guide to you throughout the whole of your Christian life?”

Some people seem so bold in asking us this question that in whimsical moments we imagine them breaking through the crowds going straight up to the apostle Paul and asking, “So, Paul, do you have a life verse?”

Would he say, do you think, “Haven’t you read my letters?”

Perhaps the verse that comes nearest to Paul’s “life verse” is Philippians 3:8:

I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

In simple terms he says, “I want to know Christ.”

That was not merely a personal testimony, for Paul assumes this should be the life testimony of every Christian. He goes on to say:

Every one of you who thinks about himself as a mature Christian should think this way. And if you think otherwise, then God will lead you back to this by his grace.¹

¹See Phil. 3:15.

This is the conviction that drives each of these chapters. So, having seen what is involved in Christ being prophet, we now turn to reflect on what it means to have him as our priest.

“Priest” is the only title given to Jesus that has virtually an entire book of the New Testament devoted to explaining it—the letter to the Hebrews.

Hebrews is an anonymous letter. Its author describes it as a brief word of encouragement or exhortation.² Central to this encouragement is his exhortation to “Consider Jesus,”³ to be “looking to Jesus”⁴—and especially to see him as our high priest.

Facing Trials

Why was that important to these Hebrews?

They had experienced the same trials as Paul did when he became a Christian.

First, they would have been disinherited. They “suffered the loss of all things.”⁵ That must have been the fate of many Jews who had come to faith in Jesus as the Messiah. Still today when a member of a strict orthodox Jewish family becomes a Christian, he or she may be literally disinherited.

So, clearly, many of these young Christians had suffered great material privation as the result of their faith in Christ.⁶ Not only were they personally *disinherited*, but they were both socially and spiritually *excommunicated*.

Put yourself in their shoes. You are a solid, law-abiding citizen of Memphis, or Columbia, or Cleveland, or Edinburgh, or London—or wherever. But because of your commitment to Jesus Christ, you are disinherited. What automatically follows? You become *persona non grata* in all the societies, clubs, networks, and

²Heb. 13:22.

³Heb. 3:1.

⁴Heb. 12:2.

⁵Phil. 3:8.

⁶Heb. 10:32–34.

social friendships (and children's schools!) that have made up the fabric of your life. All that is now closed to you. You are excommunicated from family and society.

In addition there is the place of worship you attended from childhood. Its people, services, ceremonies, songs, liturgy, and all its activities were deeply ingrained in your life. Only now, when you are no longer there, do you realize the extent to which these things defined your identity. But now you are no longer welcome there. That church—still standing there as a reminder of the community that reared you and the identity you once had as part of it—is one you are no longer a part of. Instead you now meet with a number of others in the sitting room of a friend. All the things you used to enjoy—once so “meaningful” to you—rituals, officiating ministers, liturgies, music, worship ensembles, large crowds, special days of celebration—they are all gone. Now you meet in someone's house, and they don't even have a piano!

That was the situation of the first readers of Hebrews. No longer was their worship marked by the grandeur of the temple, the mass choir, the special moments. No longer did they catch sight of the high priest—the only man who, once a year, on the Day of Atonement, was allowed to enter the sacred room to seek God's forgiveness for the people. No longer do they wait for him to reappear and raise his hands in the historic words of the Aaronic blessing, assuring them of the Lord's benediction and his peace because “there is forgiveness with him.” That visible sense that their sins had once again been covered and that the face of God was smiling upon them as his covenant people—it is all gone, never to return unless . . .

Tempted to Go Back

Unless what?

Unless they go back.

Some of them were tempted to go back.

Perhaps you are in a church that the whole congregation loves deeply, where the worship is God-centered, the preaching biblical, the fellowship caring, the vision for world missions strong, and the spiritual needs of the flock met. You have had dear friends whose company moved them to another location. They look for a new church home. But whenever you speak on the phone with them and ask how they are doing, they say, “Fine, except . . . oh, if only we could be back again in our old church; we just can’t find anything like it here!”

That was the situation for the first readers of Hebrews. In former days they could see and touch and even smell the worship services—the great company of people, the music, all of the glorious aspects of Old Testament worship that God had given. Now it was all gone.

Was it all gone—for nothing?

What was the answer? How could the author of Hebrews write anything to encourage them in this situation? His response is to say:

Don’t turn back. If you are tempted to it, then you have been looking in the wrong direction. You have been seeing things from the wrong perspective! You are not looking far enough! You’re not seeing clearly enough! Don’t you see what is really important? Get your eyes off buildings and liturgies and crowds and music. Fix your eyes on Jesus!

Listen to some of the things he says about Jesus to encourage them:

1) They have a great high priest:

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence

draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.⁷

2) They have a real salvation:

The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. 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.⁸

3) They have a perfect high priest:

For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.⁹

4) They have a better high priest:

They [the high priests of Israel] serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. . . . But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises.¹⁰

5) They have a final sacrifice:

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.¹¹

⁷Heb. 4:14–16.

⁸Heb. 7:23–25.

⁹Heb. 7:26–28.

¹⁰Heb. 8:5–6.

¹¹Heb. 9:11–12.

6) They have a better sanctuary:

For you have not come to what may be touched. . . . But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.¹²

The author is really saying to them:

What will keep you going in the way of the gospel of Jesus Christ is catching a glimpse of his greatness, and why it is he is such a *great* high priest. You have not lost—you have gained. You do not have less—you have more. Christ has done everything generations of high priests could not do. They were only shadows—he is the reality!

Two Dimensions

We saw that Jesus' ministry as prophet has both a finished and an unfinished dimension. They are both present in each of Jesus' offices—prophetic, priestly, and kingly.

There is a *finished work of Christ*.

All his work is ended,
Joyfully we sing,
Jesus has ascended,
Glory to our King.¹³

He has cried, "It is finished."¹⁴ In his death and resurrection he has done everything necessary for our salvation to be accomplished.

¹²Heb. 12:18–24.

¹³Frances Ridley Havergal, "Golden Harps Are Sounding," 1871.

¹⁴John 19:30.

But then he applies it.

There is also, therefore, an *unfinished work of Christ*. Jesus has an ongoing ministry. As prophet he continues to speak to man from God.¹⁵ Hebrews 2 brings these two dimensions together in a remarkable way. It describes Christ's finished work.

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. 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.¹⁶

Notice the two aspects of Christ's work here:¹⁷

1) He delivers us from bondage to Satan:

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.¹⁸

2) He delivers us from the wrath of God:

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.¹⁹

¹⁵ As we shall see, as King he continues to establish his kingdom and to rule over man for God.

¹⁶ Heb. 2:14–17; John 19:30.

¹⁷ See also Isa. 41:8–9; Luke 22:28; John 1:14; 16:11; Rom. 8:15; 15:17; 1 Cor. 15:54–56; Phil. 2:7; Col. 2:15; 2 Tim. 1:10; Heb. 2:14–18; 4:15–16; 5:1–2, 7–8; 8:9; 1 John 3:8.

¹⁸ Heb. 2:14–15.

¹⁹ Heb. 2:17.

He does both of these things through his ministry as priest. His sin offering of himself deals with our guilt and propitiates God's wrath and therefore sets us free from the grip of Satan. Since Christ has tasted death for us,²⁰ for believers death is no longer the wages of sin but has become the entrance into everlasting life. The leverage that Satan has used to fill us with fear has been destroyed. We are free at last.

Hebrews contrasts Christ's finished work with the never-ending work of the Old Testament priests as they brought animal sacrifices every day. But these could never take away sin because:

- They were repeated day by day. Since that was so, it is obvious that they could not fully and finally take away guilt.
- They were inadequate, even inappropriate, sacrifices for man's sin. How can an animal possibly substitute for the sins of a man or a woman?²¹

But Jesus offered *himself* as a sacrifice—man in place of men. His full, perfect, appropriate sacrifice was accepted by God. That is why God raised him from the dead. He is now seated at God's right hand. He does not continue to stand like the priest of old, in a daily repetition of his sacrifice. He has no need to! As the high priest who is himself the sacrifice, he has finished his atoning work.

In Christ our sins are fully and finally forgiven!²²

The Day of Atonement

There is a remarkable picture of this in the Old Testament in the annual Day of Atonement.²³ On that day, the high priest would take two goats. One of them would be slain and its blood offered as a sacrifice. But over the other he would confess the sins of the

²⁰ Heb. 2:9.

²¹ Heb. 10:3.

²² Heb. 9:12.

²³ Lev. 16:1–34.

people before it was taken out into the wilderness by the hand of a man who was ready to do it. This “scapegoat” carried into the wilderness the sins confessed over its head. It was then released into no-man’s land, bearing the people’s sin and guilt.

This presents a vivid illustration of the two aspects of Jesus’ atoning work on the cross.

Jesus shed his own blood as the high priest who gave himself on the cross as the final sacrifice for our sins. But, on the cross, he was also taken, through the power of the Spirit, into the no-man’s land between heaven and earth. In that lonely wilderness where he bore our sins, he experienced an indescribable sense of alienation from God. He was rejected by man and tasted death as the wages of our sin and as the curse of God.

Jesus went into the presence of God as if he were the only sinner in the world, enduring the wrath of God. Entering into the unspeakable black hole of desolation, he cried out, “My God, my God, why am I forsaken by you?” There, in the darkness, he became both the sacrifice and the scapegoat for our sins. His blood, shed for us, sets guilty consciences free and brings us peace with God.

His blood can make the foulest clean
His blood availed for me.²⁴

Nothing Left to Fear

Would that every psychiatrist, every therapist, every personal counselor in the country understood that sin, guilt, the wrath of God, and therefore the fear of death create all other fears and lurk underneath all manner of neuroses. Until this central fear is dealt with, these other fears must linger on. Why is that? Because only when we are delivered from the great fear—the fear of death and judgment—will other fears become trivial. They can be dissolved

²⁴ Charles Wesley, “And Can It Be That I Should Gain?,” 1738.

only by the knowledge that I need not fear death because the guilt of my sin has been borne by my Savior.

We have another friend in Scotland, a distinguished professor of mathematics. A number of years ago, one of his daughters, a young freshman Christian student, died suddenly. One moment from the day of her funeral has etched itself permanently into our memory. Our friend was borne along through the day by the grace of God. His quiet words as we greeted him were: “We know now that we have nothing left to fear.”

That’s it—nothing left to fear.

All this is true only because Jesus has dealt with our greatest problem.

That problem is not simply that of our fear. Our greatest problem is God himself. For by nature, we are under his wrath—and deserve to be. If we cannot deal with our sin and guilt, we certainly cannot deal with the wrath of God. But it was precisely to bear that wrath that the Lord Jesus, as our high priest, went into the holy place, the very presence of the holy God, and there experienced the awful unleashing of divine judgment.

This is why, when the resurrected Jesus revealed himself to his disciples, his first word was “*Shalom!* Peace! Now at last you may have peace with God.”²⁵

This is Christ’s finished work as priest.

Most Christians are familiar with the *finished* work of Christ but less so with his *unfinished* work. But the author of Hebrews helps us to understand that although Jesus is “*seated* at the right hand of God,” having finished his atoning work, he is still doing something. He now undertakes his *unfinished* work.

Unfinished Work

One thing you would probably learn if you spent time with us is that our Sunday school teachers taught us all kinds of hymns and

²⁵Luke 24:36.

songs that we rarely hear today. One with which our class always began was this:

Jesus, stand among us
In Thy risen power.
Let this time of worship
Be a hallowed hour.²⁶

What do we mean, “Jesus, *stand among us*”?

If you are not a Christian, you will have little or no idea what that is all about. It will be a total mystery. That may be one reason why, if you attend worship services, you find the Bible dull, hymns simply strange, and sermons boring. You have never experienced the presence of Jesus standing among his people, making the Bible a living book, the hymns making sense, and the sermons life-transforming.

A young man started attending services in a church where another of our friends is minister. After some time he came to living faith in Christ and applied for membership. The elders interviewed him. He told them how their church had changed dramatically since he first started attending. Now the music was so much better, the hymns chosen were much more singable than before, and—turning to the minister, he added, “Your sermons—well, I don’t know what’s happened to you, but they really connect now and make so much sense! You have really improved them!”

The elders were wise and mature men and probably smiled inwardly. They knew where the real change had taken place—in the young man himself. He had become a Christian. Now he was beginning to experience the difference it makes to know Christ present among his people.

The author of Hebrews teaches us that this is a central element in Jesus’ ongoing priestly ministry. He is among his people when they come together. He is present in their worship.

²⁶ William Pennefather, “Jesus Stand among Us,” 1855.

Hebrews 8:2 describes Jesus as a *leitourgos*. He is the high priest who is a minister in the holy places. You can probably see the English words *liturgy* and *liturgist* in that Greek word. The Greek word refers to the person who leads a service of worship. This is Jesus' ongoing ministry—he leads the worship of his people.

Worship Leader

Jesus leads every worship service you attend! He is the “worship leader.”

You may be the music director in a church, or its organist, or sing in its choir, or play in its worship ensemble; you may even be its minister. But the one thing you are *not* is the worship leader. Jesus is the worship leader.

Earlier in Hebrews, the author gave some major hints about what this ministry of Jesus involves:

For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one origin. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers, saying,

“I will tell of your name to my brothers;
in the midst of the congregation I will sing your
praise.”

And again,

“I will put my trust in him.”

And again,

“Behold, I and the children God has given me.”²⁷

²⁷ Heb. 2:10–13.

Notice here how the words of Psalm 22:22 are put into Jesus' mouth. This is surely significant. It was to Psalm 22 that he turned during the latter hours of his crucifixion.²⁸ That psalm begins in overwhelming darkness: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"²⁹ But it ends in words of triumph, which Hebrews applies to Jesus' resurrection, ascension, *and his ongoing* ministry—particularly aspects of his ongoing ministry that we often ignore:

I will tell of your name to my brothers;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:
You who fear the LORD, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him,
and stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
For he has not despised or abhorred
the affliction of the afflicted,
and he has not hidden his face from him,
but has heard, when he cried to him.

From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will perform before those who fear him.
The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the LORD!
May your hearts live forever!

All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the LORD,
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before you.
For kingship belongs to the LORD,
and he rules over the nations.³⁰

Jesus, the Preacher of the Word

Jesus is the worship leader, first, because he comes by his Spirit to minister his Word. He says, "I will tell of your name to my brothers."

²⁸ Matt. 27:46; Mark 14:34.

²⁹ Ps. 22:1.

³⁰ Ps. 22:22–28.

How does he do this? He does it in the exposition of Scripture, in the preaching of the Word of God. He fulfills his promise: “[My sheep] listen to my voice.”³¹ Of course, that refers in the first instance to his contemporaries. But Jesus meant much more than that. He had other “sheep” who had never literally heard his voice.³² But they too would hear it—and recognize it.

Remember when your parents used to waken you in the morning? “It’s time to get up,” they said, calling you by name.

They were calling you *before* you were aware of it. At first it was simply the sound that roused you. But then you recognized you were being called by name, and then you recognized the voice, and—at least most of the time!—you got up.

Something similar happens when God’s Word is expounded in the power of the Spirit. Jesus calls us. His voice awakens us spiritually. Slowly we begin to realize that he has been at work in our lives, and that he is calling us to come to him. We are disturbed out of our spiritual sleep; we are being “called” by name, and we recognize Christ’s voice.

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
 “Come unto me and rest;
 Lay down, thou weary one, lay down
 Thy head upon my breast.”
 I came to Jesus as I was,
 Weary and worn and sad;
 I found in him a resting place,
 And he has made me glad.³³

This is what happens when the Word is preached in the power of Christ. Christ himself addresses our minds, speaks to our hearts, draws out our affections, and brings us to faith and repentance.

³¹ John 10:16.

³² John 10:16.

³³ Horatius Bonar, “I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say,” 1846.

Paul seems to be thinking about this when he writes to the Ephesians: “[Christ] came and preached peace to you who were far off and to those who were near.”³⁴ This preaching is explicitly said to have taken place *after* Jesus had finished his work of atonement. How was it that Jesus “came and preached peace” in Ephesus? Did he ever visit Ephesus? In one sense, yes. He came and preached through the preaching of Paul and his companions!

The same point is made in Romans 10: “How can we believe in him whom we have never heard?”³⁵ That is the simple truth. We need to hear Christ if we are to recognize his voice and come to trust in him.

Hearing Christ

William Wilberforce, the great English Christian politician and social reformer, became a Christian at the age of twenty-five. One of his closest friends, William Pitt the Younger, became prime minister of Great Britain at the age of twenty-four.³⁶

Pitt had the deepest affection for his friend but could never quite grasp what had happened to him. On one occasion Wilberforce invited him to church to hear a favorite preacher. At the close of the service Wilberforce was thrilled by the preaching. But his friend Pitt—a man of considerable intellect—turned to him and said, “Wilberforce—what was he going on about there?” They sat in the same pew; they listened to the same preacher; they heard the same sermon. But William Pitt did not hear the voice of Jesus calling him.

A man once told us that his son had been far from the Lord,

³⁴ Eph. 2:17.

³⁵ Verse 14. With the New American Standard Version, the ESV footnote, and a number of commentators, we take this to be the right translation—not, “How can we believe in him *of whom* we have never heard?” While that is a biblical truth, it is an obvious one, and probably not the specific truth Paul has in mind here. The verb he uses, “hear” (*akouo*), takes the genitive case of the person heard, not—as in English—the accusative case. So we translate “hear him,” not “hear of him.”

³⁶ Hence the ditty: “A sight to make all nations stand and stare: / A kingdom trusted to a school-boy’s care.”

but one night as he came home, he “happened” to pick up a recording of a sermon we had preached. The young man listened to the sermon every day for a month. On the last day of the month, he came to a living faith in Christ. What happened? He presumably did not realize what was happening to him; Christ was calling him; only slowly did that dawn on him. He heard the same human voice again and again, but then at last he heard the voice of Christ and responded.

This is not confined to the beginnings of our Christian life. It is an ongoing reality in worship. Indeed if it were not an ongoing reality we ourselves would be inclined to abandon preaching. For without this dimension we would look out on our congregations each week, full of so many and varied needs, and simply despair. Our sermons cannot address all of these needs, nor do we have the ability to address them all in a single sermon. But when Christ comes to church and preaches his own Word, when the one who speaks to us “is able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through him”—then all needs can be met by him!

You don’t come to believe in Jesus Christ until you have heard him. Until then he is simply a character in a book. But then you become conscious that there is a totally different accent speaking to you. This is why preachers find people saying to them at the church door, “Has somebody been talking to you about me?” The answer is always, “No, but perhaps *Someone* else has been talking to you about you!”

When Christ opens, or speaks through, his Word, he begins a dialogue with the soul. He engages us at the deepest level, and we bow before him to say, “Lord, Jesus, you have ministered your Word to us.”

In some churches the service is divided between “worship” and “preaching” or “teaching.” But there is no such division. When Christ preaches his Word to us, we know that we have been brought into communion with him, and the immediate fruit of that is the

worship we bring to him during the preaching as well as before and after it.

Praise Leader

As worship leader, Jesus also leads us in our singing. Notice the words that Hebrews cites, again from Psalm 22:22: “In the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.”³⁷

In one of our churches there is a lunch on Wednesdays followed by an exposition of Scripture. We look forward to it immensely because it gives us a privileged opportunity for teaching that both helps Christians and points outsiders to Christ.

One Christmas, in one of our churches, the pastors decided (by a majority!) that as part of our “Christmas present” to those who came during Christmas week we would sing a carol together. There were mixed feelings among the pastors! As the date approached, the feelings became more mixed. But just before the day itself, we arranged for our music director to rehearse us. The most reluctant pastor smiled in relief and said, “Do you mean *he is going to sing with us?*” That changed everything! No fear now of being caught singing off-key or out of tune! Now we could appear with a measure of confidence and joy to sing. His voice would cover all our faults.³⁸

In true worship, Jesus is present, and he is leading the singing! We sing with him who says, “In the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.” We worship in union with Christ—and we sing in union with him too!

That puts a new light on worship. Who would not want to sing with Jesus? He makes our singing give pleasure to his Father. His singing of praise covers all the inadequacies of ours.

We need to recover an awareness of this ministry of the Lord. This is what encourages us to sing with all our heart. Jesus is stand-

³⁷ Heb. 2:12.

³⁸ If we mention that this particular music director had, among other roles, sung “The Voice of God” in Benjamin Britten’s *Noah’s Flyde*, and Dominick Argento’s *Jonah and the Whale*, as well as helped to back the singer Sting, the reason for the relief will be clear!

ing among his people saying: “Father, I’m in the congregation. I’m leading the praises of your people. Listen to them singing with me. Don’t you love to hear them?”

Think of this every time the service of worship begins in your church.

A graduation memory comes to mind.

One of our children studied at a collegiate university that still used only Latin throughout the graduation ceremony. One by one the various heads of the colleges led forward its graduands (wearing their undergraduate gowns) to be presented to the presiding officer. As this was done the president of the college would representatively take one of the students by the hand and introduce all his students for graduation: “Here I am and the children of my college whom I present to you in confidence for graduation.” The students were then led out, still wearing their undergraduate gowns, only later to reappear wearing their graduate gowns.

Isn’t that a picture of the ongoing ministry of the Lord Jesus? As we assemble together for worship, he comes by his Spirit to be the worship leader, the liturgist. He takes us by the hand and leads us into his Father’s presence. We are only undergraduates in his school, but he presents us, saying, “Father, here I am, and the children you have given me! I present them to you in the confidence that you will accept their worship and bless them!”

One day we will be led into the Father’s presence by Jesus. On that day we will wear graduate gowns of glory! But each Sunday, and on every other occasion we worship, we already enjoy a foretaste of it.

This is why, later in Hebrews, the author makes a staggering comparison between Old Testament worship, the prototype of which was the assembly at Sinai, and New Testament worship:

For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a

trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.” Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.” But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.³⁹

This is what happens when we go to church! The risen Jesus describes this exquisitely when he says to the church in Laodicea:

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.⁴⁰

Although these words have often been read as an evangelistic text, Jesus is actually addressing a church gathered for worship. He is talking about coming to their church, perhaps even about his presence at their Communion service.

When the Lord comes to us in this way, we are caught up into his presence and we praise him. We become conscious of his glory as his Word is ministered to us, and we begin to understand that he is not only the preacher of the Word and the leader of our praises; he is also, and supremely, the shepherd of our souls. Because he has suffered in our flesh and blood and been tempted and overcome, we know he is a priest who understands our weakness. Because he is with us, we can go to him. We know he is able to save to the uttermost everyone—anyone—who comes to God through him. And

³⁹ Heb. 12:18–24.

⁴⁰ Rev. 3:20.

we know he wants to, because he calls us his children: “Here am I and the children you have given me.”⁴¹

What are you suffering? How are you being tested? Perhaps you feel nobody knows what you are going through, nobody could possibly understand, nobody has been where you are. You might be a young person who feels your parents and brothers and sisters don’t understand you, and so you say, “Jesus would never understand me. My parents, my brothers and sisters—they don’t understand me. Nobody does! And nobody cares! ”

But Jesus’ parents didn’t understand him. His brothers and sisters and friends—none of them understood him. “People are against me,” you say. People were against him. “Nobody understands me.” Nobody understood him.

Someone reading these pages may agree with all this—but still say, “Yes, but my pain is different.” Perhaps it is the unspeakable pain of having been abused, molested, and possibly even raped. But think about Jesus’ priestly ministry. As he became the sacrifice for our sins, he also tasted (yes—he could taste it) the spittle, the blood, and the sweat, and could feel (yes—feel) the lacerations on his back, the physical abuse. He knows what it is like to be molested, stripped, beaten, and then exposed and humiliated in public. He became “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.”⁴²

“Ah, but he was sinless!” you may say. “*That* made it different for him.”

Yes, that made it different. That made the shame, the humiliation, all the more intense and distasteful for him. That’s the reason he is able to help you and pastor you. He has felt your weakness and shame in every atom of his being. But he remained absolutely faithful to God. And so he is able to take you by the hand and introduce you—in all your sense of shame—to the heavenly Father.

There is even more to our Lord’s ongoing ministry than this.

⁴¹ Heb. 2:13.

⁴² Isa. 53:3.

He has been made like us in every respect.⁴³ He can sympathize with us in our weakness because he has been tempted in every way like us.⁴⁴ Even more, “he always lives to make intercession for them,” and so “he is able to save to the uttermost.”⁴⁵ That means he is also able to save you *from* “the uttermost”—whatever that might be in your life. He holds his children with one hand, and he holds on to his Father with the other hand, and as he draws near to him, he says, “Father here am I and the children you have given to me.”

Many contemporary Christians have come to appreciate the hymn “Before the Throne of God Above”:

Before the throne of God above
I have a strong and perfect plea.
A great high Priest whose Name is Love
Who ever lives and pleads for me.
My name is graven on His hands,
My name is written on His heart.
I know that while in Heaven He stands
No tongue can bid me thence depart.⁴⁶

But the reality of gospel worship is that this same Jesus, by the power of the Spirit, is also present with us.

Have you ever come to Jesus, trusted him, and said, “My sins, Lord Jesus! You are the only one who can set my guilty conscience free, break the bondage of my soul, bring me into your presence, and help me to praise, glorify, and enjoy God forever”?

Jesus will do all this simultaneously. What a Savior!

⁴³ Heb. 2:17–18.

⁴⁴ Heb. 4:15.

⁴⁵ Heb. 7:25.

⁴⁶ Paradoxically, the hymn has been so widely sung to the contemporary setting by Vicki Cook that it is not always appreciated that the hymn itself is “traditional,” having been written in the mid-nineteenth century by Charitie Lee Bancroft.