

## STUDY 16

# The Prayers of the Saints

*Martin Bleby*

### REVELATION 8:1–6

When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. Another angel with a golden censer came and stood at the altar; he was given a great quantity of incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth; and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake. Now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets made ready to blow them.

This part of the vision given to John has to do with actions of God that wreak great judgements on the earth. These happen as each of the ‘seven trumpets’ are blown.

In the midst of this, our attention is drawn to something else, that is not unconnected with these actions of God. The matter has been introduced earlier in the heavenly vision, in Revelation 5:8, where the twenty-four elders are each holding ‘golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints’. These are before the throne of God. ‘Saints’ means simply the ‘holy ones’, that is, those who belong to God, those whom He has brought to belong to Himself. Their prayers are before Him as incense in these ‘golden bowls’. Here in Revelation 8:5, an angel is ‘given a great quantity of incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne’. The prayers of the saints, then, are now being brought into activation, enhanced by the great quantity of incense that has been given (presumably from God) and added to them. These prayers now come directly before God: ‘And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel’.

The effects are dramatic: ‘Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth; and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake’. The judgements of the seven trumpets then follow.

This is picture language, giving expression to what is beyond ordinary ways of speaking. We get the picture. We are being shown here something of the ‘mechanics’ or (better) the *mystery* of the operation of the prayers of God’s people in His universe.

If God has no need of anything from us (as in Acts 17:25), why does He receive our prayers? We might equally ask: Why did God make us at all? God has made us in His own image and likeness so that as God’s family we can participate with Him in

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His great enterprise. So God receives our prayers. More than that: God actually factors them into the operations of His purpose in His creation, and causes them to be mighty in their effects.

Why is that? Could it be that God does not want to do it without us, and that He wants us to be right in on what He is doing? God wants us to be a part of what He is doing. He refuses to bypass us or leave us out. He has given us prayer as a way for us to participate fully and effectively with Him in His actions. If we refuse to pray, that does not mean that God's hands are then tied. God 'accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will' (Eph. 1:11). If we refuse to pray, it does mean that we will not be in on what God is doing; we will not be living up to what God has made us for; and we will have had no direct personal participation in the coming of the new heavens and the new earth.<sup>1</sup>

### A GREAT QUANTITY OF INCENSE

Our interest is particularly in the 'great quantity of incense' that the angel with the golden censer is given 'to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne'. This is not what was already in the golden bowls, but is additional to it. In quantity this additional incense may far exceed what was in the bowls. Where has it come from? It is 'given', presumably from God. This incense is then offered with the incense from the 'golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints' (Rev. 5:8). Then 'the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel'. The prayers of the saints, and the great quantity of incense added, are now inextricably entwined, and indistinguishable from each other. This is what now rises before God, and dynamic effects upon the earth then follow.

Could this be an indication that, in the economy of God, our prayers and His action are inextricably entwined, and virtually indistinguishable? If so, this is a vivid affirmation of the reality of prayer given to us by God as a way for us to participate fully and effectively with Him in His actions in the earth.

We need to know more, then, of God's action in the matter of our prayer and intercession.

### GOD THE INTERVENER

In Isaiah 59:14–21, God is facing here the complete moral collapse of justice and truth in public and private life, which leaves no quarter for those who are upright, but rather endangers them:

Justice is turned back,  
and righteousness stands at a distance;  
for truth stumbles in the public square,

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<sup>1</sup> This is the bold thesis of the book by Martin Bleby, *God and Prayer: Our Participation in God's Great Enterprise*, NCPI, Coromandel East, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 2005, from which most of this material is taken.

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and uprightness cannot enter.  
Truth is lacking,  
and whoever turns from evil is despoiled.

This situation is displeasing to God. The evil of sin is personally abhorrent to Him. Even more devastating to God is the recognition of our total helplessness in it—so far degraded from the stature He made us for; that is, to be those who are with Him in all that He is doing:

The LORD saw it,  
and it displeased him that there was no justice.  
He saw that there was no one,  
and was appalled that there was no one to intervene.

‘To *intervene*’/“interpose” means to stand between people and the consequences of their moral collapse.<sup>2</sup> It is the word translated elsewhere as ‘intercede’ (Isa. 53:12; see below). It has connotations of making contact with something, or engaging with some person or activity; to be on the spot. This helps us to understand what ‘intercession’ means, on God’s part and on ours, when we use that word in connection with prayer.

This action of intervention God now takes upon Himself:

so his own arm brought him victory,  
and his righteousness upheld him.

God’s saving action here, as is to be expected, is entirely consistent with His righteous nature as ‘our father; our Redeemer from of old’ (Isa. 63:16). This is depicted by the armour in which He clothes Himself—all elements of God’s inner being and outward action:

He put on righteousness like a breastplate,  
and a helmet of salvation on his head;  
he put on garments of vengeance for clothing,  
and wrapped himself in fury as in a mantle.

‘Righteousness like a breastplate’ means that all that God does to save us will satisfy the demands of His holy righteousness. ‘A helmet of salvation’ indicates God’s determination to act for our good. ‘Garments of vengeance’ means that evil opposition will be fully requited—it will get away with nothing. ‘Fury [zeal] as in a mantle’ means that this action will be carried through, no matter what.

God’s saving action will include a final reckoning with all that remain opposed to Him—the burning hostility of His wrath against all evil will be applied in exact and just measure:

According to their deeds, so will he repay;  
wrath to his adversaries, requital to his enemies;  
to the coastlands he will render requital.

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<sup>2</sup> J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, IVP, Leicester, 1993, p. 491.

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The outcome is a wonderful fear of the Lord and His glory; that is, the honouring of God as He really is, in glad obedience and participation in His great enterprise:

So those in the west shall fear the name of the LORD,  
and those in the east, his glory;

The protective and saving presence of the Lord is with all who turn to Him from their transgression:

for he will come like a pent-up stream  
that the wind of the LORD drives on.  
And he will come to Zion as Redeemer,  
to those in Jacob who turn from transgression, says the LORD.

How is this to come about? In the final part of this passage, the Lord speaks of His covenant with His people:

And as for me, this is my covenant with them, says the LORD: my spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouths of your children, or out of the mouths of your children's children, says the LORD, from now on and forever.

This covenant here is identified with a person, whom the Lord addresses directly as 'you'. This person is one upon whom God has put His Spirit, and to whom God has given His word. God undertakes that these will abide with this one, and with His 'children', forever. This introduces in Isaiah's prophecy the figure of the anointed conqueror, through whom God intervenes to save His people from their horrible plight; just as earlier the prophet has shown one identified as the Lord's 'servant', to whom the Spirit has been given, and who speaks God's word (Isa. 42:1-4; 49:1-2; 50:4), through whom many 'offspring' are made righteous (Isa. 53:10-11).

## THE ONE WHO SUFFERS

In Isaiah 53:3-12, we see that this one, in the decisive action of intervention/intercession, is brought to deep suffering:

He was despised and rejected by others;  
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;  
and as one from whom others hide their faces  
he was despised, and we held him of no account.

Surely he has borne our infirmities  
and carried our diseases;  
yet we accounted him stricken,  
struck down by God, and afflicted.  
But he was wounded for our transgressions,  
crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,  
and by his bruises we are healed.

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All we like sheep have gone astray;  
we have all turned to our own way,  
and the LORD has *laid* on him the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,  
yet he did not open his mouth;  
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,  
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.

By a perversion of justice he was taken away.

Who could have imagined his future?

For he was cut off from the land of the living,  
stricken for the transgression of my people.

They made his grave with the wicked

and his tomb with the rich,

although he had done no violence,

and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain.

When you make his life an offering for sin,

he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;

through him the will of the LORD shall prosper.

Out of his anguish he shall see light;

he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.

The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,

and he shall bear their iniquities.

Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,

and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;

because he poured out himself to death,

and was numbered with the transgressors;

yet he bore the sin of many,

and made *intercession* for the transgressors.

Why is it that God's intervention/intercession should take this so very personal form, and involve such deep suffering, on behalf of so wide a constituency?

We can know and accept it as the intervening action of God only when 'the arm of the LORD' is revealed to us in this happening (see Isa. 53:1). It is not recognised or acknowledged by us otherwise: 'we held him of no account . . . we accounted him . . . [deservedly] struck down by God'. So lost and perverted are we in our sin that we cannot even see the one who has come to save us, without this revelation from God.

The revelation comes that it is 'our transgressions . . . our iniquities . . . punishment' that are being atoned for here: 'the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all'. The word for 'laid' here is the same word as that for 'intercession/intervention' in the last line of the passage.<sup>3</sup> Here is the engagement; here is the meeting-point. God causes all the converging lines of our iniquity to meet in this one, and there He engages with all that limits and deforms our lives, with all that prevents us from fulfilling what He has made us to be. Here God engages with us, to make full and right reckoning and satisfaction.

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<sup>3</sup> Motyer, p. 431.

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Only in this way, it would seem, in this one, in our flesh, could God confront our wilful rebellion, in all its perversion of justice, in all its physical brutality, even to ignominious death, and completely turn us around. Only in this one who, without violence or deceit, without refusal, willingly consents to bear purely and in love this necessary infliction on behalf of the many, can the human race be restored and taken on to its true dignity and place in God's purpose.

Thus 'intercession' was made for us as transgressors, by the one who, at the behest of God, numbered himself with us, and poured out himself to death. He shouldered our sin and its terrible judgement in his own body. He interposed himself to become the meeting-point between sinful offenders and the offended God. From both sides of that meeting, the righteousness of God prevailed, and was fulfilled. The intimate presence of God with His people was established and secured forever, with no barrier remaining. The one who 'poured out himself to death' will now 'prolong his days'—death has been overcome. 'He shall see his offspring'—the many children who have been made righteous by the righteous one. 'Through him the will of the LORD shall prosper'—God's purposes for his creation, in partnership with his redeemed people, can now be carried through.

Paul the apostle speaks of this one in these terms:

Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Eph. 5:2).

Could it be that this is the 'great quantity of incense' that is offered and rises before God 'with the prayers of the saints', that makes them so dynamic and effective in the earth (as in Rev. 8:3–5)?

### THE INTERCESSION OF CHRIST

Paul speaks of 'Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us' (Rom. 8:34). The writer to the Hebrews says that 'he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf' (Heb. 9:24), and that 'he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them' (Heb. 7:25). We take this to mean that Christ is now in heaven interceding for us, in the sense of pleading our cause before God, on the basis of his sacrifice for us.<sup>4</sup> We need to ask if this is so.

The word 'plead' is never used in this sense in the New Testament. The Letter to the Hebrews makes clear that there is no ongoing offering of any sacrifice in heaven; rather it speaks of a finished work that is completed (see Heb. 9:25–28; 10:18–22). 'When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty

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<sup>4</sup> For example:

And now, O Father, mindful of the love  
that bought us, once for all, on Calvary's tree,  
and having with us him that pleads above,  
we here present, we here spread forth to thee  
that only offering perfect in thine eyes,  
the one true, pure, immortal sacrifice.

William Bright (1824–1901), *The Australian Hymn Book*, Collins, Sydney, 1977, no. 440.

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on high' (Heb. 1:3). This is not the position of a suppliant, but of a ruling Lord, who has accomplished a finished work.

In what, then, does the intercession of Christ consist? When Paul says in Romans 8:34: 'It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us', he is saying far more than just that Jesus is engaged in prayerful pleading for us at the Father's right hand. He is certainly not saying that Jesus is trying to change the Father's mind and attitude to be more favourable to us. He is not saying that Jesus perpetually pleads his own sacrifice for us before the Father's throne. The action of Christ's 'intercession' has demanded the whole of himself, at the Father's initiative, on the grounds of the Father's love that is already 'for us':

If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us (Rom. 8:31–34).

The emphasis is on the whole action of the Father in giving His Son for us to die and be raised and to ascend—*this action of God's justification in the face of condemnation is Christ's intercession for us*. It is in the light of this reality that Paul goes on to say that nothing, now, or in the age to come, 'will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom. 8:39).

## THE CO-INTERCEDERS

In Isaiah 62, the anointed conqueror makes an undertaking:

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,  
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,  
until her vindication shines out like the dawn,  
and her salvation like a burning torch (Isa. 62:1).

He then speaks of what the culmination of this will be, and depicts it in terms of a wedding:

The nations shall see your vindication,  
and all the kings your glory;  
and you shall be called by a new name  
that the mouth of the LORD will give.  
You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD,  
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.  
You shall no more be termed Forsaken,  
and your land shall no more be termed Desolate;  
but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her,  
and your land Married;  
for the LORD delights in you,  
and your land shall be married.  
For as a young man marries a young woman,  
so shall your builder marry you,  
and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,  
so shall your God rejoice over you (vv. 2–5).

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Here the great themes of Revelation 19–22 are summarised as: vindication, salvation, and glory from God for ‘Jerusalem’—God’s holy people—before all the nations; a new identity from God, of great beauty and regality; never alone any more, and no longer subject to destruction; now in a union with God that is full of joy and delight, that can never be broken. This is God’s purpose, on which He has set His heart, on which He has staked His whole being, in which He has invested His entire resources, and which He will never give up on until it has been brought to fulfilment. The anointed conqueror will not rest from action, and will not cease from speaking his saving, creative word, until this goal is accomplished.

While it will be God Himself who accomplishes this, yet He has appointed that it will not be achieved without our full participation with Him, not only in its glorious outcome, but also, no less, in the process of bringing it to pass. We are to be God’s prayer-partners in His great enterprise. We are the ‘sentinels’ that God has given, for the people that will be God’s own precious possession:

Upon your walls, O Jerusalem,  
I have posted sentinels;  
all day and all night  
they shall never be silent (v. 6a).

These are the co-intercessors. Just as the conqueror himself ‘will not keep silent’, so our voice of prayer must never be stilled. These sentinels are appointed by him to be no less in earnest about the accomplishment of God’s purpose than he is himself. He wants us even to badger Him constantly into bringing it to its full and glorious completion. Just as he himself ‘will not rest’, so we also are to ‘take no rest’ on this score. Not only that, but we are to ‘*give him no rest*’ until all is accomplished:

You who remind the LORD,  
take no rest,  
and give him no rest  
until he establishes Jerusalem  
and makes it renowned throughout the earth (vv. 6b–7).

There can be no higher or more privileged calling than this—to be in the place where we know God’s heart, and are with Him in His action.

### THE SUFFERING INTERCESSORS

It follows that if we are to be in intercession with the one who intercedes for us, our intercession will take on something of the character of his. We are reminded of what P. T. Forsyth said about the true priest (see study 2, p. 18): ‘the priest who does strive to realise the despair of human guilt and deal seriously with it’, who follows ‘to the roots of human sin’ and deeper, who is ‘a prophet of the amazing, wrestling, living Word, which is hammer and fire upon the flinty rock of self-satisfaction’, who gauges ‘with the great human tragedy’, knows ‘the stung soul’s exceeding bitter cry’, and thrills to ‘the world’s woe’ and ‘the central chord of expiation on the cross’.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *Rome Reform and Reaction: Four Lectures on the Religious Situation*, Hodder and Stoughton,

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This will necessarily involve a participation in the sufferings of Christ, which cannot be avoided.

### Prayer for Enemies

It has been said that one of the most distinctive things about Christian prayer is prayer for enemies. Let Stephen's prayer lead us into this:

While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died (Acts 7:59–60).

Stephen's dying prayer is a remarkable one: 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them'. To pray for your enemies, even as they are stoning you to death, must be one of the highest forms of loving intercession. Where did this come from?

Stephen had just been given to see 'the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God'. This is the one who has said to us:

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you (Luke 6:27–28).

This is the one who himself, as he was being crucified, prayed:

Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing (Luke 23:34).

It was into the hands of this Lord Jesus that Stephen had just committed his spirit. Hardly surprising is it then to hear him praying as he dies, a prayer that is very much the prayer of the Son of God.

We noted earlier (p. 105):

'To *intervene*/'interpose' means to stand between people and the consequences of their moral collapse.'<sup>6</sup> It is the word translated elsewhere as 'intercede' (Isa. 53:12). It has connotations of making contact with something, or engaging with some person or activity; to be on the spot. This helps us to understand what 'intercession' means, on God's part and on ours, when we use that word in connection with prayer.

There we were looking at the nature of God's intercession or intervention. Here we are looking at ours. Our intercession, as God's appointed 'prayer-partners' in His great enterprise, is grounded in God's own intervention on behalf of His creation, to bring it to the goal He has purposed for it. For us to be able to intercede with Him, God gives us something of His own heart for those whom He loves. We then pray accordingly.

Jesus, in getting us to pray for our enemies, was telling us to be like God our heavenly Father:

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous (Matt. 5:44–45).

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London, 1899, pp. 231–2.

<sup>6</sup> Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, p. 491.

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Jesus is saying here that the Father loves and intercedes/intervenes *for His enemies*. No one would know this better than Jesus—for he knew personally the lengths that the Father would go to redeem His rebellious human creatures:

while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son (Rom. 5:10).

To join God in that kind of intercession will be no less costly for us than it was for Him. It will engage all our resources. That is what makes intercession for others the highest form of praying: it is the most God-like.

Knowing that we do it with Him, with the heart that He has given us of His own self-giving, encourages us to know that such intercession will be effective.

### **Blot Me out of Your Book**

The prayer of Moses after the incident of the golden calf is also instructive:

Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, ‘O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, “It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth”? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, “I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.”’ And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people . . .

On the next day Moses said to the people, ‘You have sinned a great sin. But now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.’ So Moses returned to the LORD and said, ‘Alas, this people has sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will only forgive their sin—but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written.’ But the LORD said to Moses, ‘Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book. But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; see, my angel shall go in front of you. Nevertheless, when the day comes for punishment, I will punish them for their sin.’ Then the LORD sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf—the one that Aaron made (Exod. 32: 11–14, 30–35).

The seriousness of their sin is not underestimated, nor its consequences for them. Moses senses and acknowledges that it could result in the people being blotted out of God’s ‘book’—the record of the living. God agrees: ‘Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book’. It is a fearful prospect. Even though he has not participated in their sin, Moses offers himself to be blotted out of God’s book, so that the people may be forgiven. God does not take up Moses’ offer. No doubt Moses, being a sinner himself in other respects, would not be able rightly to bear such a burden. Besides, God has reserved that position for someone else—the only one who will rightly be able to bear it—His own Son. Nevertheless, Moses is on the right track, and God hears and answers his prayer and spares the people, albeit subjecting them to necessary and appropriate chastisement.

Moses, interceding before God for the people, identified himself with them in their sin. In the love that he had for them, he refused to dissociate himself from them—sinful as they were—even if it meant that he would die with them, or in their place.

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Moses did not need to do that. God had already given him another option: ‘Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation’. Moses would not stand aside. Not that he had any virtue of his own by which he could plead for the people. He appealed fully and only to God’s own nature, and to the saving promise of blessing that God had made to the forefathers regarding this people. This appeal to the nature of God, made after the fashion of God’s own self-giving heart, prevailed with God.

This is true intercession. God Himself is the one who bears us as His burden, day after day:

Blessed be the Lord,  
who daily bears us up;  
God is our salvation.  
Our God is a God of salvation,  
and to GOD, the Lord, belongs escape from death (Ps. 68:20).

He gives us something of His own heart—and of His own suffering—to bear His people with Him in intercession.

This was symbolised in the high priest’s breastpiece (see Exod. 28:6–31):

like signets, each engraved with its name, for the twelve tribes . . . So Aaron shall bear the names of the sons of Israel in the breastpiece of judgment on his heart when he goes into the holy place, for a continual remembrance before the LORD. In the breastpiece of judgment you shall put the Urim and the Thummim, and they shall be on Aaron’s heart when he goes in before the LORD; thus Aaron shall bear the judgment of the Israelites on his heart before the LORD continually (Exod. 28:21, 29–30).

True to form, Ezra the priest similarly prayed for backslidden Israel. Though he himself had remained faithful, his prayer spoke only of ‘*our* iniquities . . . *our* guilt . . . *our* evil deeds’ (Ezra 9:6, 13), and his own shame with regard to them. As with God and those He has come to save, the true intercessor is one with those who are interceded for. This is akin to the intercession of Christ, our great High Priest, who bears us on his heart, and who ‘ever lives to make intercession’ for us (see Heb. 7:25).

Similarly, Paul bore ‘great sorrow and unceasing anguish’ in his heart for his fellow Israelites, on account of their missing out on their heritage in Christ, to the extent that ‘I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people’ (Rom. 9:2–3). There was nothing more important to Paul than his relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ (see Phil. 3:8). Yet, Paul is saying, I would forgo even that for myself, if only my people could come into their inheritance. This was his ‘heart’s desire and prayer to God for them’—‘that they may be saved’ (Rom. 10:1).

Could such a thing as being ‘cut off from Christ’ in this way ever be possible? Could we ever get our heads around what Paul was saying here, or what it might have meant for him to be able and willing to say it? It is not something that he would have said in any way lightly. The way he prayed was not reckless or foolish, but deeply considered and intentional. Where would he have got such a mindset from—to be willing to forgo all that was most precious to him for the good of the ones for whom he prayed? What—or who—did he know, that led him to pray like this? We

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remember what Moses said: ‘blot me out of the book that you have written’—if that is what it will take to bring these people to forgiveness (Exod. 32:32). It is like Jesus himself putting on the line all that was most precious to him—his intimate relationship as a human being with God (‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’)—to bring us, his enemies, back to the Father.

It is an amazing mystery, but it takes us to the heart of intercession. We cannot imagine God ever making Paul ‘accursed and cut off from Christ’ on this account. Did Paul even think that God would ever do that? Yet that is really what the Father did with His only Son. Everything that was most precious and important to Him—all that He had, without remainder—He gave, that we might be forgiven and live. That is the same heart that has now come to His apostle Paul, with regard to these Jewish people.

If we could pray like that, for all Israel—or all Australia or anywhere else—how powerfully would that avail before the throne of our heavenly Father! To pray in that way can come to us, as it must have come to Paul, only as a gift from God’s own heart. Here truly ‘the prayers of the saints’ and the ‘great quantity of incense’ from God are inextricably entwined. God’s intervention/intercession in the action of the cross is what has saved the world. Paul is simply being given here a measure of participation in God’s own heart and action in that cross. We have been given no less. That is true intercession. What a gift of love is that! Who can ever understand it? Yet, by God’s grace, we can be in it. To be in this powerful prayer-action in these days is to participate fully with God in God’s own great enterprise.