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**REFLECTIONS ON THE
GREATNESS OF OUR
LORD JESUS CHRIST**

***AS KING, PROPHET, PRIEST,
SHEPHERD AND SAVIOUR***

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“He will be great”.

Luke 1:32

“Therefore, consider the Apostle and High
Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus”.

Hebrews 3:1

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PREFACE

In order to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, we must follow the apostolic injunction to “consider Him” (Heb. 3:1; 12:3). Therefore the object of these studies is to meditate on some facets of His greatness and glory. They deal with five places in the New Testament, where it is expressly stated that Christ is great or will be great. He is the great King, the great Prophet, the great Priest, the great Shepherd and the great Saviour. In His great Name we find help and strength for our course as Christians.

1. THE GREAT KING

Luke 1:32

The Son of the Highest

When the angel Gabriel announced the birth of the Saviour to the virgin Mary, he used the words: "He will be great". It is always good for us to consider the greatness of Christ, because He is absolutely unique. Mary was a favoured woman, because she was the chosen vessel for the birth of the Messiah. But her Son was greater than she because He was begotten by the Holy Spirit, and for that reason "that Holy One" who was to be born, would be called "the Son of God" (v. 35).

Christ was also greater than His forerunner John the Baptist, of whom it is said in this chapter that he would be great in the sight of the Lord (v. 15). John was a great prophet indeed. The Lord Jesus Himself testified of him that among those born of women there was not a greater prophet than John the Baptist (that is, until the coming of the King and of God's Kingdom) (Luke 7:28). But, of course, the greatness of the forerunner was not comparable to the glory of the One whose messenger he was. John frankly admitted this to his disciples. He said he was just the friend of the Bridegroom, and he rejoiced to hear His voice. Christ must increase, but he must decrease; for He came from above and was above all (John 3:28-31).

Now what constitutes this greatness of our Lord? What is it that makes Him so unique? Of course, His glory is seen in many aspects, but the angel points to His greatness as Son and King in particular: "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob for

ever, and of His Kingdom there will be no end” (vv. 32,33). Nobody can be compared to Him because He is “the Son of the Highest”.

Christ’s glory as the Son of the Highest has to do first of all with His dominion over all things. God Most High is the Creator of heaven and earth, the supreme Ruler (Gen. 14:18-20; Deut. 32:8; Dan. 4:2,3,17,34). As the Son of the Highest, Christ will inherit dominion over all things. His Sonship is related here to His dominion, His Kingship, as is shown by the second part of Gabriel’s announcement.

The title “the Son of the Highest”, or “the Son of the Most High” is found only in the Gospels. In the Epistles we usually find more intimate titles, such as “the only begotten Son” (1 John 4:9), “the Son of the Father” (2 John:3), or “the Son of His love” (Col. 1:13). This corresponds more with the nature of the full New Testament revelation, for God has been revealed as Father by His beloved Son. “No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him” (John 1:18).

Apart from the verse now under discussion (Luke 1:32), the expression “Son of the Most High God” is found only in the story of the healing of the demon-possessed man in Luke 8:28 and Mark 5:7. The demon acknowledged Christ’s supreme authority by saying with a loud voice: “What have I to do with You, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg You, do not torment me!” For He had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. Even in His humiliation here on earth Christ had authority over the evil spirits, and this Scripture shows that they acknowledged His authority (cf. Acts 16:16-18).

The term is used only once in the plural (“sons of the Highest”) as a promise to the disciples: “But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Highest. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil” (Luke 6:35). Here emphasis is laid on the care of the Most High God for His creatures, even if they

have turned away from Him. As sons of God, we should follow Him in this respect and reveal His nature.

But it goes without saying that Christ's Sonship is absolutely unique. Although believers are the many sons who shall be brought to glory, He is the Son, the Author of their salvation. We are creatures and we partake of flesh and blood, but He took part in the same (Heb. 2:14 JND). Manhood was not His natural condition, because He existed in the form of God (Phil. 2:6). The eternal Word became flesh and "dwelt among us" (John 1:14). The Creator Himself entered into His creation.

This is the miracle of the incarnation, as described in such a touching and lovely way in Luke's Gospel. God has found His good will, His good pleasure in man (Luke 2:14). The clearest proof of God's love and grace towards man is the fact that the Son of God became Man Himself. He lived and walked among us, and in the end He even took our place in the judgment that we had rightly deserved. The path of Christ led from the manger to the cross. There we see Him lifted up as the Son of Man, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

The mystery of the incarnation is explained by the angel announcing Jesus' birth to Mary as follows: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). Christ is God and Man in one Person. He was born of God in a unique way, and therefore He is the Son of God — even in His manhood. He was begotten by the power of the Highest, and so He can be rightly called the Son of the Highest. How great He is! How near has the Most High God come to us! How deep has He bowed down towards us in His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord!

And of His Kingdom there will be no end

As we have seen before, Christ's Sonship is here particularly related to His Kingship. As the Son of the Highest, He has supreme authority. In this passage the period of the coming Kingdom is referred to as follows: "And the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of His Kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:32,33).

This is not the throne where Christ is now seated, at God's right hand in heaven, but the throne that He will establish on earth after His Second Coming (cf. Rev. 3:21). It is the throne of His glory as Messiah and as the Son of Man (Matt. 25:31). Jerusalem, the city of the great King, will be the centre of that reign which will extend to the ends of the earth. He will be honoured as the great Son of David, His father according to the flesh (Rom. 1:3). He will be recognized as the true Prince of Peace, a greater than Solomon (Matt. 12:42), for the Son of David also proves to be none other than the Son of the Highest!

The prophetic perspective of this verse reminds us of the predictions of the Old Testament, mainly those of Isaiah and Micah. These prophets both refer to the divinity of the Messiah, who will sit on the throne of David: "For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace"; "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be ruler in Israel, whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting" (Isa. 9:6; Mic. 5:2).

Then they both continue to speak about the greatness of His government, which will be marked by justice and peace: "Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His Kingdom"; "For now He shall be great to the ends of the earth; and this One shall be peace" (Isa. 9:7; Mic. 5:4). So both passages speak about the

greatness of His Person, and then about the greatness of His government over the earth. The Messiah is not only a Man, the Man Christ Jesus, but also the eternally blessed God. He is the Eternal Son, the wonderful I AM. Therefore it is appropriate for Him to receive a universal and eternal government; this is in accordance with His dignity.

It would seem that the words of Luke 1:32 (“He will be great”) are quoted literally from Micah 5:4 (“He shall be great to the ends of the earth”). He is greater than David and Solomon, from whom He descended according to the flesh. He is the true King and Priest, the Branch of righteousness who would be raised to David (Jer. 23:5; 33:15; Zech. 3:8; 6:12-13). His greatness surpasses that of all other kings, for even the great of the earth will bring presents and bow down before Him (cf. Ps. 72).

It is wrong to spiritualize this earthly perspective and to confuse the present dispensation of grace with Christ’s millennial reign. We should bear in mind that expressions like “the throne of David” and “the house of Jacob” have a concrete and literal meaning for God’s earthly people. In explaining the Scriptures they should be related to the future restoration of the people of Israel. Otherwise these terms are rendered powerless, and God’s promises are not taken seriously. The throne of David is the throne that will be established in Jerusalem; it is not God’s throne in heaven. And the house of Jacob is the literal offspring of the patriarch; it is not the Church, which has a heavenly origin rather than an earthly one as it consists of all those who are born from above.

If we love Christ’s appearing, we will also rejoice in this earthly aspect of His greatness and glory. He who once was rejected by this world will reign with power. From His coming will ensue a sabbatical rest for Israel and for all the nations. In fact the whole creation will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. The Lord’s reign will be visible for all men, and the government of Christ will be the consummation of the theocratic reigns of

David and Solomon. According to First Chronicles 29:23 these kings sat on the throne of the LORD in Jerusalem. The LORD, who is a great King (Mal. 1:14), will reign in the Person of His Son. He will be great indeed!

Great among His brethren

While thus considering the greatness of Christ's reign, one cannot help thinking of what is said about Mordecai at the end of the book of Esther. There we read of "the greatness of Mordecai, to which the king advanced him", and also that he was "great among the Jews" (Esther 10:2,3).

Just as Mordecai ruled over all the world at that time on behalf of king Ahasuerus, so the Son Himself must reign on behalf of God the Father till He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death. Then the eternal state will begin, and everything will be in harmony with God, that God may be all in all (cf. 1 Cor. 15:24-28).

Finally, we have to ask ourselves to what extent Christ is great in our hearts and lives today. Indeed, He will be great, there is no doubt about that. He will receive the honour that is His due, for the Father will exalt His Son in the whole creation. But the question that we have to face is whether we are exalting Him now in our lives. The apostle Paul strived after this continually, for it was his earnest expectation and hope that "as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death" (Phil. 1:20). Christ should be formed in us (Gal. 4:19). His life and His character should be seen in us.

This is the practical application of Luke 1:32 to us as Christians. Is the authority of this great King, who will soon fill the world with righteousness, a reality in our lives today? Do we enjoy His peace? The Prince of Peace, who will soon proclaim His peace on earth, is able to let it rule it even now in our hearts and lives by the power of His Spirit.

2. THE GREAT PROPHET

Luke 7:16

No man ever spoke like this Man

During the time of Christ's service as the Servant-Prophet here on earth, as He is depicted by Mark in particular, opinions on His Person varied widely. Some people rejected Him as a prophet. The Pharisees did not accept Him, for in their view no prophet had arisen out of Galilee (John 7:52). Simon the Pharisee said to himself that He simply could not be a prophet, for in that case He would never have allowed a sinner woman to touch Him (Luke 7:39).

Others, however, were more favourable in their judgment and did regard Him as a prophet. The Samaritan woman admitted: "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet" (John 4:19). Even large multitudes acknowledged Him as such. They considered Him to be a prophet, as there had been so many in Old Testament times (Matt. 16:14; Mark 6:15; Luke 9:8).

But Christ was more than one of the old prophets. He was a very special prophet. Many people acknowledged this and spoke about Him as the Prophet, the One whom Moses had already announced in Deuteronomy 18:15ff. So they recognized Him as the long-anticipated Prophet, and said: "This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world" (John 6:14; 7:40).

John the Baptist was absolutely right in not claiming this honour for himself when people asked him: "Are you the Prophet?" (John 1:21). He was honest and told them that he was not. Then John told them of the One who was to come after him but was preferred before him. John himself was just the forerunner, the herald who prepared the way for Him. Christ

was superior to him, and John effaced himself and said: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30).

Indeed, Christ was the Prophet. He surpassed all other prophets, for “He who comes from above is above all” (John 3:31). He had descended from heaven and told them heavenly things, the things that He Himself had seen and heard with the Father (John 3:12,13,32).

Christ was also superior to Moses, who announced His coming as the Prophet: “The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear” (Deut. 18:15). This verse refers to Christ’s manhood: He was to be raised up from among the people. He took part in flesh and blood, for in all things He had to be made like His brethren, yet without sin. Although He came from above, He became truly Man, and in this humble form He addressed Himself to the people, speaking the words that God gave Him to speak.

As a Prophet He was unique, for He was the Word incarnate, the personification of God’s message to mankind. Previously God had spoken by the prophets, but now He has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, or literally “in [His] Son” (Heb. 1:1). This means that God Himself has spoken to us as a divine Person, and that Person is the Son!

He spoke the words of God

Therefore Christ is an unequalled prophet. He is the Son Himself, the Creator of all things and moreover, the Redeemer who is now seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high (Heb. 1:2,3). He is exalted above the angels, those mighty ministers of our God. He is superior to Moses, the man of God by whom the law was given to Israel (John 1:17).

So it is good for us to consider Him, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession (Heb. 3:1). By faith we see Him at the

right hand of God, crowned with glory and honour. His voice is no longer heard on earth as it was at the time of His sojourn here. He has now spoken from heaven (cf. Heb. 12:25). The Lord has done so by the Spirit of truth, who has led a number of apostles and prophets to write the various books of the New Testament.

Whenever we pick up our Bible, we are sure that we have the complete Word of God before us. God's Word was fulfilled, or completed by divine revelation to the apostles and prophets of the present dispensation of grace (cf. Eph. 2:20; Col. 1:25). In the Gospels we have the words which Christ spoke to His disciples here on earth, and which were brought to their remembrance by the Holy Spirit (John 14:26). The Acts and the Epistles present us with the ongoing testimony of the Spirit, the teaching of "all [the] truth" (John 16:13a), or "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27).

As John told us in his Gospel, the Holy Spirit did not speak on His own authority or initiative. The Spirit declared and disclosed the things that He heard from the exalted Christ (John 16:13-15). The Spirit, who descended on earth after Christ was received up in glory, disclosed these heavenly things to the instruments which He used for the completion of the Word of God. In this way He told them even "[the] things to come" (John 16:13b).

These things to come are largely found in the book of Revelation (cf. Rev. 1:19), which in many respects fits in with the prophetic books of the Old Testament which discuss God's dealings with Israel and with the world. Of course the Scriptures are linked together in other respects as well, for the Old Testament points in many ways to Christ, while the New Testament shows the fulfilment of many prophecies concerning Him and His finished work. However, this falls outside the frame of our subject.

But what a tremendous assurance it is to have the complete Word of God in our hands, and to know that the

Scriptures provide us with everything we need on our pathway to heaven. All this we owe to our great Prophet, the heavenly Man Christ Jesus. Through the Spirit He has revealed to us the deep things of God, the secrets of God's heart, and has given them to us in the Scriptures of the New Testament in spiritual words (1 Cor. 2:6-16).

A Prophet mighty in deed and word

The account in Luke 7 tells us how Jesus was honoured as a Prophet. This is a lesson for us that we might also honour Him as such, for we have every reason to glorify Him as our great Prophet. We should be perfectly aware of His greatness, even more than the people of Nain. For them the raising of the young man was proof of His mission: "Then fear came upon all, and they glorified God, saying, 'A great prophet has risen up among us'; and, 'God has visited His people'" (Luke 7:16).

If we just take these last words literally, they testify to the fact that God has come to man in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). Christ is truly God. God visited His people when Christ came into the world. But He is also truly Man. His human nature is indicated by the first remark of the people: "A great prophet has risen up among us". God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law (Gal. 4:4). So this verse in Luke 7 testifies to Christ's greatness as God and Man in one Person.

As the Son of the living God, He gives life to whom He will (John 5:21). The young man who had just been raised from the dead was the living proof of this. Along with the daughter of Jairus (a child) and Lazarus (an adult), this young man is sufficient proof of Christ's power over death.

And is this not valid in a spiritual sense as well for all those who have heard the voice of the Son of God? For He has authority to give eternal life to as many as the Father has given Him (John 17:2,3). And we know that He has raised us from the

“grave” of our sins and our guilt, to enable us to walk with Him in newness of life. He has given us everlasting life, and we have passed from death into life (John 5:24,25). How great He is, our Prophet and Saviour, the Son of the living God! We are sure about His greatness, as we personally experienced His power in delivering us from the bonds of death.

Responding to the miracle that had happened, the inhabitants of Nain “glorified God”. This will also be our reaction, as we see the quickening power of Christ at work in people who are dead in trespasses and sins. Christ is indeed the great Prophet. Both His words and His actions show His unique mission and His lifegiving power, reaching beyond the grave. Along with those two disciples who were on the road to Emmaus, we can say as believers that He is a Prophet “mighty in deed and word before God and all the people” (Luke 24:19).

There is just no one like Him, the Prophet confirmed to the people by God with the accompanying signs and wonders (cf. Acts 3:22,23; 7:37). The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17). Therefore let us thank God for sending His Son, His Prophet, His Spokesman. For as we worship Him, we see the Father’s image in Him, full of grace and truth.

3. THE GREAT PRIEST

Hebrews 4:14; 7:4; 10:21

The letter to the Hebrews offers us a picture of the greatness and the glory of the Lord Jesus, particularly with regard to His unique, perpetual priesthood. What an encouragement it is to have such a great High Priest! He is our great High Priest in connection with three fundamental needs:

- (1) in order to make propitiation for our sins,
- (2) to sympathize with our weaknesses, and
- (3) to support our priestly service in the sanctuary.

High Priest with regard to our sins

As far as our sins are concerned, we know that Christ as a merciful and faithful High Priest has made propitiation for the sins of His people (Heb. 2:17). With His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. Under the old covenant the prescribed sacrifices had to be always repeated, and the blood of atonement had to be carried into the sanctuary every year (cf. Lev. 16), but the work of Christ has accomplished the atonement once for all.

When the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son. And the Son accomplished a unique work in accordance with the counsels of the Father. On the basis of this work He is now seated at God's right hand on high, while the Holy Spirit has been sent down to testify to these things. For the Holy Spirit also witnesses to us. And what an assurance it is to know through faith in Christ and in His finished work, that He has perfected us for ever and has cleansed us from all our sins (Heb. 10:1-18)!

High Priest with regard to our weaknesses

After His atoning death and His glorious resurrection from the dead, Christ took His place “at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man” (Heb. 8:1,2). There He is now ministering in the sanctuary, appearing in the presence of God for us.

Just as Aaron carried the names of the sons of Israel on his shoulders and his breast whenever he entered the holy place to appear before God, Christ now represents us on high and continually intercedes for us. He is not dealing with our sins now, but with our weaknesses, because our sins were removed for ever by His redemptive work. For by His sacrifice we have been sanctified once for all, so that the relationship between God as the Creator and Judge and ourselves as His creatures is fully restored.

This is the fundamental aspect of the truth, which is different from the practical side, that is, the daily relationship between God as our Father and ourselves as His children. The practical enjoyment of our fellowship with the Father is, alas, daily disturbed by sins, and then Christ acts as our Advocate with the Father (1 John 2:1). His intercession with the Father — together with His work in our hearts and consciences — leads to restoration, as is so clearly illustrated in the story of Peter in the Gospels (Luke 22:31ff.; John 21).

But Christ’s present task as High Priest with God has to do with the weaknesses, the shortcomings and the needs of all those who by His sacrifice for sin have been reconciled to God once for all. Hebrews 4 is very clear about this priestly task of the Lord: “For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (vv. 15,16).

As the holy and sinless Son of God, Christ could not sympathize with our sins. Indeed, He came to suffer for our sins, and to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. But He does sympathize with our wants and weaknesses as pilgrims who are on their way to glory. We are surrounded by all kinds of dangers on our way to heaven, and in view of this our Lord is always active as the great High Priest to help in time of need. He is able to save to the uttermost, to protect and keep us and bring us safely to the end of our pilgrimage, since He ever lives at the right hand of God to make intercession for us (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25).

High Priest with regard to our worship

As our heavenly High Priest, Christ is also active with regard to our worship as a holy priesthood in the presence of God. We are not only a people of pilgrims needing a compassionate High Priest on our pathway through this world, but we are also a people of priests following the steps of our great High Priest in the sanctuary.

We can draw a parallel between ourselves and the Israelites in the wilderness: on the one hand they were on their way to the Promised Land and needed priestly intercession in order to reach the end of their long journey, on the other hand they could daily meet God at the door of the tabernacle of meeting and appear in His presence with the appointed sacrifices. God's purpose for the Israelites was to be to Him "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6).

However, we know that the law could make nothing perfect because of man's weakness, and that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest. It was, in fact, closed (Heb. 7:19; 9:8). It is only on the basis of the redemptive work of our Lord Jesus Christ, accomplished once for all, that man has free access to God in the present dispensation of grace. Having been redeemed by the blood of Christ, we are free to

enter the sanctuary with a good conscience and follow the steps of our great High Priest. As sons of God, wholly sanctified by the work of Christ and anointed with the Holy Spirit, we are called to enter the Holiest, to draw near to God with our sacrifices of praise: "Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (Heb. 10:19-22).

Christ, the great and chief Priest, is the Head of this New Testament family of priests who draw near to God with their sacrifices of praise, and the precious incense of their worship (cf. Rev. 8:3). He leads and directs our service in the sanctuary, like Aaron, the old covenant head of the priestly family, led the service of his sons in the house of God.

Contrasts with the Old Testament

All these three aspects of Christ's priesthood show stark contrasts with the Old Testament dispensation, when weak and mortal men were appointed as high priests. We now deal with better, permanent and heavenly things. Since Christ is much greater than all the high priests of the old covenant, the results of His priestly work are also richer and more glorious.

As to His priesthood in connection with our sins, the contrast has already been mentioned. Whereas in Israel the high priest had to enter the Most Holy Place every year with blood of another, to sprinkle it on the mercy seat and before the mercy seat, Christ with His own blood entered the Holiest once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. Before the throne of God His blood testifies for ever to His finished work that met all God's holy demands. But under the old covenant everything

was partial and temporary; the atonement was always limited and incomplete.

There is also a great difference between the effectiveness of the Old Testament priesthood and the present priestly service of our Lord Jesus Christ in connection with our weaknesses. For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us. He entered into the heavenly sanctuary, where He ever lives to make intercession for us. And His strength is not exhausted by this task. He does not need to be replaced by someone else: night and day He carries us on His strong shoulders and on His loving breast.

Because of His intercession we are protected so as to reach our destination safely. The heavenly Canaan, the heavenly Jerusalem is our hope. How great is Christ as our High Priest! Having linked us with Himself as a people of priests, He grants us free access to God's holy presence even now. He supports our priestly service in the heavenly sanctuary. It is there that we can serve (for instance, "to burn incense"), and that continually.

Since we have access with confidence we need not wait, like Zacharias the priest, for our turn to be chosen by lot to go into the temple of the Lord and worship (cf. Luke 1:8,9). What a privilege it is, always to be able to dwell in the house of the Lord and to behold the beauty of the Lord, to be impressed by God's glory as it has been revealed in Christ. In the light of the heavenly sanctuary we see everything on the level of God's thoughts.

Therefore it is good and necessary to reflect on the greatness of Christ as our heavenly High Priest. The letter to the Hebrews is, in fact, one passionate plea to behold His glory, to consider Him attentively and to see how great He is in every aspect of His Person and work. He is superior to the angels, to all men, to Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and even to Abraham. For He is the Creator of all things, the Redeemer and the Heir of

heaven and earth. He is the Son Himself, who became Man and passed through the sufferings of death into the glories of heaven. There He is now seated at the right hand of God, and with the eye of faith we see Him and consider Him, the great Apostle and High Priest of our confession (Heb. 3:1).

It is a tremendous encouragement to have such a High Priest, and it will stimulate us to run the race that is set before us. We rest in His redemptive work, by which we have been sanctified once for all. We also rely on His help and strength in all the needs and trials of life. Our help is from above, from the sanctuary! It is the Lord in heaven who supports us, our “great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God” (Heb. 4:14).

Since we have such a High Priest, who is exalted far above men and angels, and seated at the right hand of God, we can draw near with confidence. We come boldly to offer our prayers and supplications: “Seeing then that we have a great High Priest (...) let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace” (Heb. 4:14-16). Because this sympathizing Priest intercedes for us with God, the outcome is sure. His presence at God’s right hand and His intercession guarantee the right answer to our need.

So we have enough reasons to consider His greatness as our heavenly High Priest. He is much greater than Aaron, whose priesthood was earthly and temporary. Christ is a Priest for ever according to the order of Melchizedek. According to this entirely new order He continues for ever and has an unchangeable priesthood in heaven. The appeal of Hebrews 7:4 to consider “how great this man [Melchizedek] was, to whom even the patriarch Abraham gave a tenth of the spoils”, is also an indirect appeal to consider the One of whom the king of Salem was just a type. Let us consider Him who is now seated at the right hand of God, and admire His greatness! And the assurance that we have such a great High Priest should also encourage us to come boldly to the throne of God as a family of priests. We should not only come with our requests, our

supplications, but also offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name (Heb. 10:19-22; 13:15).

4. THE GREAT SHEPHERD

Hebrews 13:20

Christ is superior to Moses

Christ is not only the great High Priest (cf. Heb. 4:14; 10:21), but also the great Shepherd whom God brought up from the dead (Heb. 13:20). No doubt this verse in Hebrews 13 (a chapter which, among other things, deals with the role of those who rule over God's people), alludes to the fact that the Lord Jesus is superior to Moses, that great leader and shepherd of the people of Israel. Although the letter to the Hebrews emphasizes Christ's priesthood and, as a result, extensively deals with the contrast with Aaron the priest, the contrast with Moses the lawgiver is not forgotten.

The subject of Christ's superiority to both Aaron and Moses follows on the introductory chapters, which present the Lord in His deity and humanity. Although He is the Son of God (Heb. 1), He is also the Son of man who entered into the glory of heaven along the pathway of suffering and utter humiliation (Heb. 2). This twofold character is the basis of both His unique priesthood (the role of Aaron) and His leadership, His task as the Apostle of our confession (the role of Moses).

Therefore Hebrews 3:1 exhorts us to consider Christ Jesus, "the Apostle and High Priest of our confession". With the eye of faith we see Him crowned with glory and honour, the true Moses and the true Aaron. He is superior to Moses, who indeed was faithful as God's servant here on earth (Heb. 3:3-6). Our Lord is more than a Servant. He acts as Son over God's house, and He has spoken now from heaven (Heb. 12:25).

Moses tended the flock of God by giving instructions to the people of Israel concerning their worship and their journey through the wilderness (cf. Ex. 3:1,12; Ps. 77:20). But Christ is the great Shepherd of a heavenly people. He has delivered us from the power of darkness, from the power of the Prince of this world. And He has brought us into God's own presence, just as Moses delivered Israel from the hand of Pharaoh and led them to the mountain of God. He gathers His own from Jews and Gentiles alike, and He leads us as one flock in green pastures. He goes before us and He shows us the way by His Word and His Spirit. In this way He leads us all the days of our life — in order that we might even now enjoy God's presence, and "dwell in the house of the LORD for ever" (Ps. 23:6). He is coming quickly to take us up and introduce us into the glory of heaven, which He has won for us by His death as the good Shepherd (John 10:11).

From Egypt to Canaan

Hebrews 13:20 hints at Israel's passage through the Red Sea. The bringing up of Moses as the shepherd of God's flock out of the waters of the sea serves as an illustration of Christ's resurrection. Christ, the great Shepherd of the sheep, has been brought up from the dead (cf. Isa. 63:11-13). By the power of God He was brought up from the waters of death, that bitter death which He really tasted for us to grant us new life.

Moses, having come forth out of the sea, led a large throng of Israelites who followed him. Likewise, Christ is the Leader of a heavenly people who are linked with Him in His resurrection from the dead. Delivered from the power of sin and death, we sing the song of salvation together with Him (cf. Ex. 15:1). Thanks to His guidance we shall safely reach the end of our pilgrimage, the holy hill of Zion (cf. Ex. 15:17). He is the Author and Finisher of our faith (Heb. 12:2). He is our Leader who has delivered us from the power of the enemy and now guides us towards our heavenly home.

As the good Shepherd He once laid down His life for the sheep so that they might have life, and might have it more abundantly (John 10:10,11). After having been brought up from the dead, He acts as the great Shepherd of the sheep. In connection with this subject we should compare also the order of Psalms 22 and 23. While Psalm 22 shows us Christ laying down His life for His own, and receiving a glorious answer to His sufferings by His resurrection from the dead, Psalm 23 then shows us how He leads the sheep on their way through the wilderness.

Although our Lord was declared to be the Son of God with power by His resurrection from the dead, this is not what is emphasized here in Hebrews 13:20. It is the point that God the Father raised Him up again. It was the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead. Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father (Rom. 6:4). God is presented here as the "God of peace", a title that is used in the New Testament in connection with sanctification and complete victory over the power of evil (cf. Rom. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 4:8,9; 1 Thes. 5:23). In Hebrews 12:14 peace and holiness go together. Christ's resurrection from the dead by the God of peace created a new situation of peace and harmony, a state of holiness which cannot be disturbed by sin or by the power of the evil one.

Christ died to sin once for all, thereby solving the problem of sin for ever. The life that He now lives, He lives to God in the holiness of heaven, in the presence of the Father by whose glory He was raised from the dead (Rom. 6:10). The glory of the Father, the inner excellence of all that the Father is, demanded that Christ, who died to glorify the Father and to bring all His excellence to light, be raised from the dead and be received up in glory.

So here the activity of God the Father is emphasized. It was the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep. And it is added that God was able to do so "through the blood of the everlasting

covenant". The resurrection was founded on the blood of the Lamb, the blood of atonement which met all God's righteous demands once for all. The Lamb who was slain was the good Shepherd, who gave Himself for our sins. And He was slain to redeem us to God by His blood, to protect us from judgment.

This is yet another reference to Israel's deliverance from Egypt on the basis of the blood of the paschal lamb that protected the Israelites from the destroyer. Both the death of the paschal lamb and the passage through the Red Sea typify the death of our Lord Jesus Christ. The blood of the lamb safeguarded Israel from the wrath of God — the righteous Judge who demands the sinner's death. At the Red Sea, however, God acted as the Saviour, the Deliverer of His people. He brought to light His full salvation in that He delivered His people and destroyed the enemy.

Thus the blood of the paschal lamb constituted the basis of Israel's deliverance from Egypt and the bringing up of the people out of the waters of the sea. In the same way, the blood of Christ on the one hand shelters us from God's righteous judgment, while on the other hand it is the basis of our deliverance from this present evil age and the power of the evil one. The latter aspect is shown in type in the passage through the Red Sea. We have been brought up out of the waters of death together with our great Leader, and so we have been delivered from the power of the adversary and from the world of which he is the ruler. We should walk now in newness of life, and follow Him wherever He goes as the great Shepherd of the sheep.

One flock with one Shepherd

For the believing Hebrews it was not all that easy to walk in the footsteps of Christ, as it involved breaking away from Judaism and separating themselves from the religion of their fathers. Henceforth, their place was with Christ, "outside the

camp” (Heb. 13:13), outside the established religious system which had cast out the Messiah. They were to share with Him a place of reproach and rejection outside the Jewish sheepfold, and to dedicate themselves to the Christian worship around Christ Himself as the new Centre of attraction.

In John 10 the Lord had already announced that He was going to lead His sheep out of the fold, the fence of Judaism. He also had other sheep which were not of this fold — Gentile believers — and them also He was to bring. And there would be one flock with one Shepherd (John 10:3,4,16). The Church that is gathered from the Jews and the Gentiles is one flock, led by one Shepherd.

All former distinctions have disappeared. Christians make up a new fellowship with Christ as their only Leader. He gives rich blessings to His sheep: salvation, life in abundance, true liberty, protection from the enemy, guidance, and green pastures. So He leads us on our way to the Promised Land.

It is important to know this Shepherd very personally: “The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want” (Ps. 23:1). We also know Him as the one Shepherd, and the good Shepherd (John 10:11,14,16). Besides, He is the great Shepherd and the Chief Shepherd of the flock of God (Heb. 13:20; 1 Pet. 5:4). He uses others to tend His sheep, but all these shepherds are under His authority; He is the Chief Shepherd. When He appears He will reward all those who cared for the sheep, by giving them the crown of glory that does not fade away.

My Shepherd is the Lamb,
The living Lord, who died:
With all things good I ever am
By Him supplied.
He richly feeds my soul
With blessings from above;
And leads me where the rivers roll
Of endless love.

5. THE GREAT SAVIOUR

Titus 2:13

The Saviour of Israel and of the world

It is a well-known truth that God is the Saviour of His people. He was the Source of salvation for Israel of old, and they had to put all their trust in His divine deliverance. Already in the exodus from Egypt we see how God brought about His help, “the salvation of the LORD” (Ex. 14:13). And this caring and saving love of God, who time and again delivered Israel from the hands of their enemies, can be traced throughout the history of God’s chosen people. It is particularly in the book of Isaiah that God is called the Saviour of His people (Isa. 43:3,11; 45:15,21; 49:26; 60:16; 63:8).

But this “salvation of the LORD” should not only be understood in military terms, as a complete deliverance from hostile oppressors. God is also the Saviour who delivers from far greater hostile powers that are threatening man, namely Satan, sin, and death. He saves His people from all their uncleannesses (Ezek. 36:29). He opens the wells of salvation for them, and clothes them with the garments of salvation (Isa. 12:3; 61:10). It is obvious that in these Scriptures the word salvation has a deep spiritual meaning, and implies much more than a temporary deliverance.

The New Testament fits in with this, as is obvious from Matthew’s explanation of the meaning of the name Jesus: “And you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). The name Jesus means “the LORD is salvation”. Here the evangelist clearly links the meaning of this name with the salvation of God’s people from their sins. Christ was the promised Saviour, who was born in the city of David

(Luke 2:11). And Zechariah prophesied about His entry into the city: “Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation” (Zech. 9:9).

But He is more than that. For He is also the Saviour of the world — as the Samaritans rightly acknowledged (John 4:42). Although salvation is of the Jews (John 4:22), it is not limited to the Jews. Since the Messiah has been rejected by His own people, God’s salvation has been offered to both Jews and Gentiles.

There is no longer any difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. But there is also free grace for all through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth to be a propitiation by His blood. He is the true “mercy seat”, or “throne of grace” where sinners can find a refuge (Rom. 3:23-25). Salvation is to be found in Him alone: “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12; cf. 5:31 and 13:23).

As Christians we are looking forward to Christ’s Second Coming as our Saviour, while at the same time we look back upon His first coming in humiliation. The apostle Paul makes this clear in his letter to Titus. We are “looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works” (Titus 2:13,14).

Christ will return. But what is He to us? He is our Saviour, who gave Himself for us — and the cross clearly showed how far He went in this respect — to redeem us from our sins. In Him we have found full salvation, purification of our sins and deliverance from the power of sin. In Him the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men (Tit. 2:11). We can rightly say that He is our Saviour, our Redeemer, if we confess our sins and believe in Him.

The Saviour of ‘the body’

But Christ is also at this present time the Saviour of His own, for we are kept by Him on our way to heaven. Of course, His work of redemption is finished. His sacrifice is perfectly sufficient and needs no repetition. When He died for us once for all, He obtained eternal redemption for His own (Heb. 9:12; 10:10-18). What I want to say is that we have a mighty Helper in heaven who never forgets His own, who intercedes night and day for us to see us through until the end.

Therefore Christ is also called “the Saviour of the body”, that is, the Church (Eph. 5:23). He takes care of all those who are His own, and have been made members of His body. The Church is the special object of His love, and He provides us with everything we need. In a more general sense this divine care is also exercised towards all men, for “God is the Saviour of all men, especially of those who believe” (1 Tim. 4:10).

However, Christ is also our Saviour with regard to the future. We are kept through faith for the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time (1 Pet. 1:5). Christ will appear as “the Saviour of the body”, also in the literal sense of the word. Although we belong to a new creation, we are still living in the old creation that was subjected to futility as a result of Adam’s fall. The whole creation groans and labours under the curse of corruption, and God’s children, too, groan within themselves. We are eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of the body (Rom. 8:23).

For that purpose Christ will appear as the Saviour, the Redeemer: “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself” (Phil. 3:20,21). So at the Lord’s coming we shall experience the power of His resurrection physically as well (cf. 1 Cor. 15:51,55; 1 Thes.

4:15-18). We owe the salvation of our whole spirit, soul, and body to Him. How great He is as our Saviour!

Our God and Saviour

We should also note the fact that He is called our God and Saviour in Titus 2:13. Without any doubt, it is very important for us to know the Lord as our personal Saviour and Redeemer. Yet this is found but once in the New Testament, in the magnificat: “And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour” (Luke 1:47). It is much more common to describe God or Christ as our Saviour, which indicates that as redeemed persons, we are not alone but linked with all those who will inherit salvation.

Moreover, Christ is called our great God and Saviour here. We have already seen a few aspects of His greatness as the Saviour, but in this verse we are told explicitly that He is great. This is confirmed by the subsequent words “God and Saviour”. This verse is one of the many proofs of Scripture that Christ is truly God. There is no need to doubt His greatness, for He is the eternally blessed God Himself (Rom. 9:5).

In Second Peter 1:1 we find an almost identical expression: “Our God and Saviour Jesus Christ”. In this letter He is twice called the “Lord and Saviour” (3:2,18). Christ is Lord, and He is God: God the Son, the Creator, the eternal Word, which was in the beginning with God, and through whom all things were made (John 1:1-3; Col. 1:15-17; Heb. 1:1,2).

But He is the Son of God incarnate. The Word became flesh; He was manifested in the flesh; in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily (John 1:14; 1 Tim. 3:16; Col. 1:19; 2:9). He is the true God and eternal life (1 John 5:20). He is God and Man in one Person. Although He was in the form of God and did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, He took the form of a servant and came in the likeness of men — yet without sin. He took part in blood and flesh (Phil. 2:6,7; Heb. 2:14; 4:15). How great is our Lord, who is called our God and

Saviour here. He is the true God, and He became Man in order to be our Saviour!

The divinity of Christ is not only asserted in the New Testament; it is also found in the Old Testament (cf. Isa. 9:6 and Mic. 5:2). The Messiah is no less than the LORD Himself. The words "God and Saviour" go together, and it is a striking combination that occurs also in the Old Testament (Ps. 106:21; Isa. 43:3; 45:15,21; Hos. 13:4). The LORD is a great God, and there is no Saviour besides Him.

In the New Testament we meet this Saviour God in the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is called by the same names: He is "our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ" (Tit. 2:13). He is the humble Man Jesus, who is at the same time the Christ, the Anointed of God. God has made Him both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36). He is the One through whom God carries out His plans, God's Anointed who accomplishes His counsels.

In this respect it is noteworthy that the expression "God our Saviour" (or, "our Saviour God") is very characteristic of the letter to Titus and the first letter to Timothy (1 Tim. 1:1; 2:3; Tit. 1:3; 2:10; 3:4). This significant title shows us God's special relationship with man in the present time. In the Old Testament He had already revealed Himself as the Creator and Judge, and also as the Lawgiver of Israel. But the present dispensation has a different character. We are not under law but under grace (Rom. 6:14). In Christ God has revealed Himself as our Saviour, and He has stretched out His hands not only to Israel but also to the Gentiles.

God our Saviour desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4). We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son as Saviour of the world (1 John 4:14). Man has proved himself to be an inveterate sinner (both without Law and under Law). In this respect there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles. Yet, God has revealed Himself now as our Saviour on the basis of Christ's finished work on the cross and His resurrection from the dead.

He has brought to light His salvation, and He offers this great salvation to all as long as the day of grace lasts.

It is not only forgiveness of sins that is offered freely, but also a complete inner renewal, a new birth for people with an evil nature, a quickening of dead sinners, full deliverance from the power of sin and death, a wholly new relationship with God. Who would neglect so great a salvation (Heb. 2:3)?

Another remarkable thing in the letter to Titus is that both God and Christ are alternately called our Saviour. This occurs in every chapter: “God our Saviour”, “Jesus Christ our Saviour” (1:3,4); “God our Saviour”, “our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ” (2:10,13); “God our Saviour”, “Jesus Christ our Saviour” (3:4,6). This proves again that Christ is one with the Father. In Him, God has revealed Himself as our Saviour, and has come down to man. God stooped low in order to redeem us.

Our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people. When He appears He will give us the full enjoyment of His great salvation according to spirit, soul and body. That is why we look forward to His coming (Tit. 2:13,14).