

Hebrews 4:14-16

Lent 1, March 6, 2022
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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. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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.

If you lived in early 19th Century England and needed to seek an audience with King George III, you'd have to endure quite a spectacle in order to do so. First, you would enter the royal courtroom. All of the nobles of the King's court would be staring at you, and you would advance, eyes lowered, at the direction of the royal page. Standing in a long line, you would gradually move up, step-by-step closer to the throne, until it was finally your turn to speak. Then, you were to bow down to your knees, head touching the floor, until you were given approval to make your case heard. Even with the stage now yours, you still were not permitted to look at the king when speaking to him. You were to keep your eyes lowered, and when dismissed, you were to walk backwards out of the courtroom so that the king would not see your back. As you can imagine, seeking an audience with the king was traumatizing.

And if you think that would be intimidating, consider what it would be like to approach the Throne of God Almighty. He is the one that not only rules but who rules over the universe. He is the one not only listens to our pleas, but He also listens to the thoughts in our heads and the attitudes of our hearts, so that nothing is hidden from Him. He is the one who alone is Holy, and standing before Him, exposed with all of our dreaded sinfulness, it would be obvious that we are anything but holy.

Well, you don't have to imagine what that would be like at all. In fact, you've already done that today. When you approached the Lord as we confessed our sins, you were doing exactly what the writer to the Hebrews describes in verse 16, as we were ***"draw[ing] near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."***

But just because you've done it so many times, doesn't mean that you don't become fearful when you think about it. In truth, we've likely all experienced those times when we did not want to look at our Father's throne, and we didn't particularly want Him to look at us either. Those times when we felt so broken and ashamed, totally unfit to stand before the Lord. If that's ever been you, or if perhaps you're feeling that way now, then this text is for you. Here Christ reassures you that you don't need to flee from God's presence, and you don't have to be afraid. In the words of our theme:

Christ Emboldens Us to Approach the Throne

I. He does so with His sympathy

II. He does so with His salvation

Now, we don't know who wrote the letter to the Hebrews, there are a few good theories. In fact, we don't even know to whom this letter was written exactly. It seems pretty clear that it was written to a group of Hebrew Christians, ethnic Jews who believed in Jesus as the Messiah. Given the many quotes from the Old Testament, which as Hebrews they were very familiar with, and given the ongoing proofs that Jesus is superior to the prophets, to the angels, to Moses, to Aaron, the priesthood, and the sacrifices—all things that Hebrews held dearly—a group of Hebrew Christians is a good guess.

But even without knowing exactly the original audience, we can construct some concrete ideas about the community of Christians to whom the author is writing. If you sat down to read through this letter, you get an idea of the challenges they are facing. They are a church that is struggling. They are a people who at one time when they endured troubles, when they endured shame and humiliation, they accepted that gladly. They knew they had a better possession coming, an everlasting one, because they had a certain hope in Jesus.

But for some reason, or perhaps for many reasons, they've grown tired. Ground down. Worn out. And the original enthusiasm, the original spark, the original zeal, the original life of faithfulness, this is starting to fade for this group. Church attendance is starting to falter. They're becoming hard of hearing when it comes to the Word of God. The easy way out for them is returning back to the Jewish faith which was still waiting for the Messiah, a faith obsessed with ritual and festivals and Sabbath observances and sacrifices. And so, the author pens them this letter showing them with irrefutable proofs that if they went back to the old order of things, they'd be opting for something that is worse. After all, as this letter proclaims again and again, Jesus is BETTER.

He's the better High Priest, the great High Priest, who doesn't have to sacrifice for sin every single day, because by one sacrifice of His body on the cross, He had forgiven all sin forever. He's the better sacrifice, because unlike the blood of bulls and sheep, His blood actually did something. It is that blood which ***"cleanses us from all sin."*** (1 John 1:7) His is the better covenant, because the old covenant—the old contract—between God and man required mankind to do what it was unable to fulfill. Jesus' new contract stated that He would do it all, and man would benefit. That's why the author writes, ***"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."*** Don't go back to the old ways, cling to Jesus!

Well, maybe you can relate with the feelings within this group of Hebrews. Not that you're considering switching to Judaism, but that feeling of being worn down, tired, you've lost your spark, you're simply struggling. We have jobs to go to in order to pay the bills, we have families to attend to, we have a sick parent, we have this meeting, that activity, another appointment, and it starts to pile up. And it's not one thing, not one catastrophe, but it's just the routines, one on top of the other, the endless monotony. And soon we find ourselves getting tired, getting worn down. Then the life of faith and the life of faithfulness starts to sag. Later on in this letter, the author pictures ***"drooping hands and . . . weak knees."*** (Hebrews 12:12) That happens to us because things happen, over and over and over and over again. It's the image of someone who is weary, and it's the picture of us.

The sad thing is that when we're enduring this weakness, this sort of weariness, our response is often to avoid doing that one thing which we really need to do. These are the times when we ought to be approaching the throne of grace to find help in time of our need! Do we do that though? When we're tired and just worn out, do we take these things to God and trust in His gracious care, or do we simply sulk and fruitlessly try to figure it out on our own?

Martin Luther described this tendency of ours in his Large Catechism under the discussion of prayer: ***"Suppose that the richest and mightiest emperor on earth were to order a poor beggar to ask for whatever his heart might desire and was prepared to give him great imperial gifts. And suppose that***

the fool of a beggar were to ask for no more than a ladle-full of beggars soup. For having treated his imperial majesty's command with mockery and contempt, he would rightly be regarded as a rogue and a scoundrel and as one who was not worthy ever again to come into the emperor's presence. It similarly exposes God to shame and disgrace if we to whom He offers and assures so many inexpressible riches despise them or do not confidently expect to receive them, but instead are scarcely able to bring ourselves to ask for a piece of bread."

Are you feeling worn down, tired out, just exhausted by life? Well then, **"hold fast to your confession."** For **Christ Emboldens You to Approach the Throne.** Bundle up these concerns, this weariness and weakness, and take it to the Lord. And as you approach, He would have you know that you are not alone. For Christ is the one who stands by in sympathy. That word "sympathy" is taken straight from the original Greek "synpathos," which literally means "to suffer with."

And isn't that what your Savior does for you? He suffers with you, He suffers alongside you. And that sympathy is so important. Think of those times when you went through real crises in your life. Who were the most helpful people to talk to? Wasn't it people who could sympathize?—people who'd been through what you'd been through and knew what it was like? That's what we have in our great High Priest who has passed through the heavens. In our text, the author reassures us that **"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."**

Jesus understands your temptations and your struggles with weakness and weariness, because He Himself subjected Himself to weakness and was also subject to temptation. No matter what it is, if you struggle against greed, against pride, against lustful thoughts, against anger, against hopelessness and despair—be certain that Jesus stands shoulder-to-shoulder with you in your trial. He understands. He also has felt the agonizing pull of the same temptations that you're going through.

That might just be one of those Scriptures that we disbelieve the most. It's hard to imagine Jesus, the Son of God, struggling through the *same* temptations as myself. Temptation to sin, sure, but specifically what I'm going through? *That* temptation? That's hard to believe. And yet, God is not exaggerating when He says, Christ **"in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin."** C.S. Lewis once wrote, *"No man knows how bad he is until he has tried very hard to be good. . . . Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. Christ, because He was the only Man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only Man who knows to the full what temptation means."*

As Christ invites you to take these troubles to the throne of God and make your requests known, be sure to remember that Jesus has experienced the same. And that should embolden us to go to God all the more eagerly. After all, earlier on in this Epistle, we can read, **"For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted."** (Hebrews 2:18) And that's the key. Yes, **Christ Emboldens Us to Approach the Throne**, doing so **with His sympathy**, but sympathy by itself only goes so far. If someone can sympathize with you, that's great, but what you're really looking for is help. And *that* Christ can offer as well. For He emboldens us to approach the throne also **with His salvation.** In other words, He can do something about it.

Let's turn our attention to the last verse: **"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.” That’s good news, isn’t it? With a great high priest who sympathizes with us and suffers alongside us like Jesus, even sinners like us can obtain mercy and find grace from the Lord.

I love the distinction between those two terms found here in this text, ***“receive mercy and find grace.”*** Typically, we might think of those two ideas as being one and the same. Really, there’s a bit of a difference there. I always think of mercy as the love of God which leads Him to *not* give us what we deserve. And grace is that love of God which leads Him to give us what we can’t deserve. Putting that into layman’s terms—when you approach the throne of God, what do you deserve? You deserve to be afraid, for you’re standing before the one who can hear your thoughts and see your heart and declares that the soul that sins shall die! (cf. Ezekiel 18:20) And instead, He takes His judgment from you. That’s mercy. What does He give you instead? That which you could never deserve: His full forgiveness, His undying love, His devotion to your salvation, and His promise to help in time of need. That’s grace. **Christ Emboldens Us to Approach the Throne** and this what He promises to give.

Isn’t that great? Even wretched failures like you and I can march right into the royal court of the Almighty God and lay our petition before His throne. That’s because the sacrifice of God’s sinless Son was sufficient—sufficient to cover our guilt and atone for our sin. It’s sufficient because Jesus was tempted in every way as we are, yet not once did He fail. And that perfect record of the Son of God is now handed over to you as your personal record against sin. How can that be the case that God would count my record as spotless? It doesn’t make sense, but that is what God says, when He proclaims, ***“I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.”*** (Isaiah 43:25)

And you know what that means, don’t you? It means that we can boldly go to the throne of God at any time. After all, what’s to keep you out of the throne room of God now that Jesus has forgiven you upon His cross? If *you* don’t qualify to approach the throne—you for whom Christ poured out His blood—then who could? Bring your sins in repentance to the throne of grace, and God cannot refuse to forgive them. Not now. Not now that the perfect sacrifice has been offered for *you* on Calvary. Bring your prayers, your requests, your weariness, your sorrows to God’s throne, and He will not refuse you on those accounts either. After all, ***“He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?”*** (Romans 8:32)

So don’t let anything keep you from approaching the Lord’s throne. Not your sin, not your guilt, not your weariness or lack of desire. Instead, let us ***“let us hold fast our confession.”*** If it still seems like an intimidating prospect, you’re not alone. Martin Luther, the first time he was to take Holy Communion, actually ran out of the church in a panic. That’s how awestruck he was at the thought of approaching God’s throne and receiving the true body and blood of Christ. But he didn’t need to flee, and you don’t need to run away either. Because **Christ Emboldens Us to Approach the Throne. He does so with His sympathy.** He knows what you’re going through, He can relate. And **He does so with His salvation.** He can do and has promised to do something about it. ***“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.”*** In Jesus’ name. Amen. ***“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*** (Philippians 4:7) Amen.