

The merciful priest

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[0 : 00] Hebrews 4.15 Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God.

Let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.

He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness.

Because of this, he is bound to offer sacrifice for his own sins, just as he does for those of the people.

[1 : 14] And no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was. So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him, who said to him, You are my son.

Today I have begotten you. As he says also in another place, You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to him, who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.

Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

Good morning, everyone. My name is Andy, the assistant pastor here. It's great to see you. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you that we can come to you in prayer, that you hear us.

[2 : 40] Please help us now to understand what you have to say to us, that we can draw near to you. Amen. Well, the outline is on the back of the service sheet, if you want to keep Hebrews 4 open.

Let me start with a question. Where do you turn for help? Where do we turn for help? Maybe at work, maybe it's a colleague, or your line manager. At school, maybe it's a classmate, a teacher, or a chat GPT.

Maybe in parenting, you turn to other parents, or you turn to tablets, both iPads and paracetamol. Maybe you just simply turn to the fridge when you need help.

We turn to places and people who can help us in our time of need, or at least we hope they can. Perhaps people who have gone through similar experiences to us.

Well, what about in a Christian life when it comes to following Jesus? Where do we turn for help? Help with our struggles. Help with our temptations. Again, it could be others.

[3 : 54] Those who have gone through a similar experience. It could be podcasts and could be books. Could be the fridge again. I don't know. Maybe we're not tempted to turn anywhere.

Maybe we just try and just muddle through or struggle through on our own. Perhaps this morning, we are, some of us, are very aware of our weaknesses.

We are weary. We are tired in the struggle with sin. And a lot of the time when we come to church, it feels like we're surrounded by strong people who largely have it all together.

And I'm the only one who's struggling. And yet, when we scratch the surface, perhaps that's not true. And so when we do struggle, we have that thought.

We feel doubly fragile. We see people going strong in the Christian life. But actually, we're all weak. We are all in need of help to make it to the end in the Christian life.

[5 : 01] And we can begin to take comfort that that is nothing new. The first readers of the letter Hebrews that we've started back in the autumn, we're now coming back to it, they were the same, encountering struggles in following Jesus.

They're battling their own sin. They're battling the cultural pressure to follow Judaism. And with their little, tiny little church in some little house down a little alleyway when everyone else is going to the temple, they're struggling with their following Jesus.

And they're suffering for following Jesus. They're tempted to turn away from Jesus. They're tempted to drift. They're tempted to throw the towel in altogether.

And they've just been encouraged in chapter 4 to keep striving, to keep going, keep striving to enter God's rest of heaven. Don't be like the Old Testament generation in the Israelites in the wilderness that hardened their hearts and didn't enter that promised land.

And we ended, last time we looked at Hebrews, with verses 12 and 13, with God judging hearts.

God's word on the journey is like that surgeon's knife that opens up and leaves hearts exposed to the Lord himself.

[6 : 26] we were left with that real point of discomfort, perhaps, that God can look into our hearts and see exactly what's going on. But just as the writer of Hebrews takes his readers to a real point of discomfort, he gives another reality.

reality. The Lord who judges our hearts is the same Lord who is the merciful high priest who can help in our time of need. And grasping why Jesus being a priest, although that's quite a foreign concept to us, grasping that truth is such good news.

And it'll mean it'll help us all the more to persevere in the Christian faith. Although we had chapter 5, verses 1 to 10 read, we're going to dip into that, but we're going to think really about three verses.

And we've got three points this morning. The first is this, we have a great high priest in heaven. We have a great high priest in heaven. Look down at verse 14 again. 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. As was alluded to earlier, we've been doing a Bible overview in growth groups and we recently saw that in the Old Testament, God established a tabernacle and this sacrificial system where men ordained as priests would serve the role as mediator between God and the people.

[8 : 03] And so, you're aware of your sin, you'd bring your animal, you'd take it to the priest, you'd confess your sin. The priest would acknowledge your confession of sin, would sacrifice the animal on your behalf to God to say for forgiveness.

And among the priest, there was the high priest, he was the priest boss. And chapter 5, verse 1, outlines his job spec. So if you look at chapter 5, verse 1, we'll dip in there.

For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.

The high priest was a man chosen by God who made intercession for all the people of Israel. And we saw that recently in growth groups when we looked at the Day of Atonement in Leviticus chapter 16.

The high priest would go into the most holy place of the tabernacle and present those sacrifices to make atonement for the sins of Israel.

[9 : 08] That is the system that God established and it was to teach one huge lesson that when you sin, you need a sacrifice.

When you sin, you need a sacrifice. You need someone to offer the sacrifice for you. And the promise of God was that when sins were confessed, they would be forgiven and atonement and made possible.

That was the whole system. That is what he was teaching the people. And Hebrews is saying that when Jesus came, he didn't just come as a king and God's son, or both of those are true that Hebrews has already said.

He came as a priest. Someone who was fully man, tick, chosen by God, tick, to represent us to him. And in his priestly role, he goes one better. Well, not one better, infinitely better than the priests in the Old Testament. Because not only did he offer sacrifices for sin, he in himself is that sacrifice for sin.

[10 : 14] That's how Hebrew starts. He made purification for sins. And here we get a hint in chapter 5. If you look at verse 9. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal

salvation to all who obey him.

The system God put in place drilled it into the people that sacrifices are needed to pay for sin. And they all pointed to Jesus' sacrifice.

As Jesus died at that cross, he in himself is the source of eternal salvation to all those who obey him, who come to him in repentance and faith.

And so, what does this writer want us to do with this truth that Jesus is a high priest? Well, verse 14 again, let us hold fast our confession.

hold fast is a nautical command to sailors to grip onto the ship's rigging during a storm to avoid being washed overboard.

[11 : 20] You can hear the captain shout, hold fast. I made the mistake of trying to walk with an umbrella yesterday and definitely had to hold fast when I was blown away.

And as we've seen, the original heroes were in danger of drifting away. Drifting from Jesus himself. In their struggle, they are encouraged, hold fast, grip on to what you've heard and come to believe. Your sin deserves a sacrifice and in Jesus you have one. The Son of God become human like us, made purification for sins in his death.

He's risen and ascended in glory to the right hand side of the Father. He has passed through the heavens, not just through the curtain to the holy place of the tabernacle, but through the heavens to the very place of God himself.

And he is there right now serving as our great high priest, mediating between us and the Father. Perhaps this Christmas you'll get a present that comes with a lifetime guarantee.

[12 : 23] Well, in Jesus, our salvation comes with a lifetime guarantee. Our place in heaven is secure and guaranteed by Jesus, our high priest who will never leave the Father's side.

He is there right now interceding on our behalf. And so too with the storms in the Christian life when we are buffeted, not by storm Darragh, but by our sin, by temptation to drift, we are to grip onto Jesus and his gospel message hold fast.

We have a great high priest in heaven, a source of eternal salvation for all those who obey him, for all those who come to him for forgiveness.

Well, that's all good and well, isn't it? But what's that got to do with tomorrow morning when it's dark and cold and I'm slumped over my cornflakes and I'm feeling stressed and sinful and weary?

Feels like there could be a bit of a disconnect there. I don't know if you know the geography of Rio de Janeiro down the bottom in Brazil.

[13 : 34] Down the bottom you've got the favelas. You've got the people in the slums, in the mess, in brokenness. And then you look up on the mountain and you've got the statue Christ the Redeemer there with his arms aloft all aloof.

And it feels like that could be a disconnect, couldn't it, between us and Jesus. He's the high priest in heaven with his hands out like this but I'm in the mess down here. Can he actually do anything?

What does it mean for Jesus to be my priest tomorrow morning? Well the answer is that Jesus is enthroned in the heavens but he's not aloof and he's not separate from us in our struggles because secondly we have a high priest in heaven who sympathises with our weaknesses.

if you look down at verse 15. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are yet without sin.

And to sympathise in the Bible means to have deep empathy and concern and actively help. It's used elsewhere in the Bible to talk of a mother caring for her children or a brother coming to the aid of a sibling.

[14 : 53] Maybe when you think about sympathy maybe think of your mum or if that doesn't help think of your gran. The point being that as we live our lives Jesus knows what we are going through and more than that he knows exactly what help we need in our weakness.

Not because he's a therapist not because he's read a book on helping people not even because he's the son of God who sees into our lives he sympathises with us because he is one of us and he has faced that deep temptation himself.

To verse 15 again one who in every respect has been tempted as we are. Now when Jesus came down that first Christmas and grew up on earth it's not like he just surfed through life without any trouble whatsoever.

We often give that impression can't we? He fought the fight with temptation. Not that Jesus has experienced literally every human temptation.

I don't think that's what is in view here. He hasn't experienced the temptations of a married person or a parent a woman or the elderly but Jesus resisted temptation at the most intense level.

[16:13] In fact it's because Jesus never gave in to temptation that he knows all the more about temptation than anyone else.

C.S. Lewis a Christian writer said this on this only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. After all you find out the strength of the army by fighting against it not by giving in. And so Jesus knows what it's like to be tested to the brink. As he lived totally devoted to his father it took him all the way to the garden of Gethsemane.

That's what chapter 5 verse 7 alludes to. Jesus falling to the ground crying as he is praying turning to his father to help.

But he kept going and he never gave in to the army of Satan in the battle of temptation. And so in Jesus we really do have a high priest who can sympathise with our struggles.

[17:22] Have you been betrayed insulted abused so has he. Do you feel marginalised misunderstood rejected Jesus gets it he's been there.

Do you feel overwhelmed because of loneliness or depression or grief or Jesus too was overwhelmed with sorrow as he faced his death.

Do you feel overwhelmed by temptation and wonder how you can keep going? Jesus understands. And when we entrust ourselves to our great high priest Jesus Hebrews 4 tells us what we have. We have someone in heaven who is able to feel sympathy for our weaknesses. Well okay again it's all good having someone on the throne who has sympathy with me but again can he really help? Can he do something on a blustery Monday in 21st century London? It's like the child who brings their parents some complicated maths homework and says help me and the parent says well I sympathise with you I'd love to help but I can't.

[18:38] Well wonderfully it's not like that with Jesus he not only sympathises with our struggles he can actually help because we have a great high priest who sympathises with our weaknesses who crucially thirdly helps us in time of need.

Look down at verse 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.

Jesus being a high priest will dominate Hebrews for the next few chapters so we'll have plenty of time to think more about the implications chapter 5 6 and 7 and 8 and 9 I think it goes up to chapter 10 so for now we're just going to think about this verse with four questions where do we turn to where do we turn to when we need help where we draw near to the throne of grace those are actually quite shocking words when you think about the whole Bible story that we've been seeing in growth groups we can draw near to God's throne someone in the Old Testament wouldn't dream of doing that ancient rulers were not approachable you risked death if you approached the wrong way actually today's monarchs aren't that approachable either are they we have a friend who used to work in royal protection who spent time on Buckingham Palace with a rifle you can't just wander up to the king or the White

House and nor could you wander up to God's throne in the tabernacle people died when they tried to do that actually when the tabernacle was moved from bit to bit the Levites were instructed don't let anyone come near it whilst you're setting it up kill them it's that serious you cannot just wander up to God in the Old Testament but now because we have a high priest in heaven we do not have to be afraid to approach God's throne we can come and draw near to him he allows this throne to be the throne of grace and not the throne of fear and when we draw near to the throne of grace for the first time through trusting in the Lord Jesus our high priest we find a king only too ready to show mercy to sinners we draw near to the throne of grace but when can we draw near constantly constantly we can draw near and let us draw near conveys the sense of an approach that never ends and we are constantly to come near to

God and experience the benefits that flow from that first repentance and faith the relationship that comes from forgiveness again that is completely foreign to the Old Testament one day a year they drew near to God through one man going behind the curtain but now we can constantly draw near to God's throne wherever we are whenever this means it is never a time when it's inappropriate to draw near to God there is never time where he's not available there is never a circumstance that makes approaching the throne of grace a bad idea we sung in our kids song earlier but it is a profound truth that every day is a good day to pray to Jesus it's a right day an appropriate day to pray to Jesus as one writer puts it coming to the throne of grace means approaching

[22 : 33] God as a generous king who makes himself available daily for an audience with his subjects in the throne room of his palace when can we draw near constantly well then how do we draw near well confidence we draw near with confidence confidence here means to speak freely and candidly and so this is talking about prayer we come confidently to God's throne as we speak to him fully assured he is there and he is listening and he is willing and able to help perhaps if you're weak like me then when we fall into sin we can find ourselves reluctant to pray I know that God has promised to forgive but it's almost like I'm embarrassed and I imagine God's heart sinking as I come to him me again yes that again instead it's so easy to ignore

God or hide from him like the naughty child who hides in their bedroom rather than owning up to what they've done and that is essentially what humanity has been doing ever since the Garden of Eden what did Adam and Eve do they hid from God what do people do when Jesus came those Christy verses they stay in the darkness they don't come to light and actually we're tempted to do that a lot aren't we and yet encouraged we are encouraged here to draw near with confidence when I pray and come to the throne room of heaven in my miserable state the Lord deals with me gently and what would you expect to find at the throne of grace grace of course and mercy as well it's one thing to find sympathy and understanding isn't it but we need power and energy and sustaining strength to keep going and when we turn to him he doesn't lose his rag or come down on us on like a ton of bricks he deals gently and graciously with us he gives his grace that energizes and empowers us to help and to keep striving to enter that rest perhaps you're here this morning and you wouldn't call yourself a follower of

Jesus and you've never responded to that invitation in the first place to draw near to the throne as he looks on your heart he sees some pretty unpleasant stuff as he does mine and yet Hebrews invites us today not to turn away not to run and hide but to come before the throne of grace for help for forgiveness to draw near in faith and when we do that we find mercy forgiveness kindness and welcome because Jesus our priest is our sacrifice we can come to him he will show us his mercy he won't drive us away but Christ the redeemer welcomes us with open arms and for those of us who are followers of Jesus here this morning well can you pinpoint what the temptations are that you're struggling with do you know the battles you feel you're losing in living for

Jesus maybe it's the upcoming battles of Christmas that you need help with the struggles to get through the season and maybe it's seeing family where your patience can run paper thin and you need help you need grace and you need mercy do you have a temper that you find difficult to control are we are we tempted to crave other people's approval the whole time is lust the demon that we're fighting are we anxious and controlling finding it hard to trust God maybe it's a low level anger that simmers away at how life is panning out at the moment maybe we all have to think what is it for us what are the battles well Hebrews 4 encourages us that in those moments we can draw near to God in prayer confident we have one in

Jesus who sympathizes with our weaknesses and crucially he is able to help in our time of need and so if we are to say no to sin our hearts must be fed with grace and if we are to be fed with grace well then we've got to come boldly to the throne on which Jesus is seated he is poised he is ready to help us in our time of need where can we turn for help verse 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 let's pause for a moment of reflection and to pray personally and then I'll lead us in prayer heavenly father we thank you that we have a great high priest in heaven the one who sympathizes with our weaknesses the one who gave himself as a sacrifice for sin thank you that we can turn to him and he helps us in time of need please help us to go to him daily hourly for help to keep going to keep striving to that eternal rest in heaven amen