

Hebrews 4:14-16 “God Listens to Us”

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me seemed insufficient for that day.

Anybody know who said that? Anybody know? Was it me at a recent session meeting? Could have been, could have been, but no, wasn't me.

It was the most powerful man in the world, surrounded by the wisest counselors in the country. Is that helping anybody yet? Abraham Lincoln, very good. Abraham Lincoln, driven to prayer.

[1 : 03] What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer. We've been talking this summer about the friend that we have in Jesus.

Our relationship with him, walking in the pathways of his grace. Getting to linger with him over a meal as he insists on doing this with his people and as he calls us to make a high priority in our lives.

We started by saying a significant part of our relationships with God is his word. That God speaks to us and we must listen to him.

Bible's open, right? God speaks to us. That is amazing, isn't it? But there's another side of that coin in relationship with God that I think may be even more remarkable than the fact that God speaks to us is that God listens to us.

That's part of the conversation. See, God invites us into conversation with him so God listens to us and we speak to God himself. There are the titles of our sermons for today and next week.

[2 : 24] God listens to us. We speak to God. We're going to talk for a couple weeks about prayer. It's another classic means of grace. A pathway where we walk with Jesus, find his grace to come into our lives.

See how closely the Bible and prayer are connected to one another? They feed one another in our relationship, our conversation with God. Right now, my preferred method of praying is to be reading scripture and praying along with those words.

Maybe just one verse or one section at a time as I hear God's word speaking to me. The words that come into my heart to speak back to him. I even pray out loud typically.

I know not everybody does. I will pray out loud to help me experience those actual conversations. I want us to ponder this morning that remarkable reality that God listens to us.

And think about how prayer then is a consistent way that God brings his grace into our lives. Let's read from Hebrews chapter 4 as we begin.

[3 : 39] We've heard parts of this passage referenced already this morning. It's a wonderful call to prayer that we'll come back to later. Let's give our attention to God's voice as he speaks to us in his word.

Hebrews 4 beginning at verse 14. 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.

Pray with me. Our Father, we seek now to find your help. We've opened your word before us.

[4 : 43] It is eternal and powerful and perfect. And we want to have a relationship with you. We want to know you. And that is, honestly, Father, it's too glorious for us to, in some ways, imagine, certainly for us to make it happen.

It's a relationship we don't deserve. An audience with you is one we could never earn. And so would you help us even now?

We need your grace. We ask for it in the precious name of Jesus, your Son, whom you love. Amen. If you had been in the D.C. airport last week, you might have overheard my phone conversation while I waited for my connecting flight. I'll give you a sample. Speak to an agent.

Speak to an agent. I would like to speak to an agent. Zero. Zero. Zero. Speak to an agent.

[5 : 54] Fine. Mortgage transfer. Back to menu. Speak to an agent. Speak to an agent. I know you want more info, but I want to speak to an agent.

And this went on for quite some time. Conversation with an automated recording. And then I finally got an agent who introduced herself, who got my name and promptly said, let me put you on a brief hold.

The third time I think that I said speak to an agent, a couple people sitting nearby smiled understandingly. Because I think we've all been there, right?

Needing help and wanting to know that someone is listening and that they're there to help. I think all of us who have ever prayed have been there too.

Some of you have told me that this morning. Hearing nothing but an automated recording, as though our prayers are hitting the ceiling and bouncing back.

[7 : 13] Getting nowhere. Wondering if I'm wasting my time. Is anyone even listening? Even biblical authors like King David have felt this tension.

He says things like, God, why are you so far from my groaning? Why do you not answer me? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

Those are real feelings, right? Many of us have had them. And at the same time, the Bible teaches us over and over that while we may feel God doesn't hear an answer, while we feel that our prayers are doing absolutely nothing, the foundational reality of our relationship with God is that he is a prayer-hearing, prayer-answering God.

Oh, you who hear prayer, to you shall all flesh come. Psalm 65 too. Part of God's very nature is that he hears prayer.

When his people pray, God listens. It's who he is. He demonstrates that part of who he is throughout the story of his relationship with his people.

[8 : 37] Just flip through one page after another. It's the pattern of our relationship with him. All the way back to when the people of Israel cried out under unjust oppression in Egypt.

What happened? Yahweh heard and he sent them a deliverer. Hannah prayed to God in her distress over not having a child and she wept bitterly.

And God heard her cry and gave her Samuel. King Jehoshaphat came before the God of Israel seeking military aid to protect his people, praying, we do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you.

And God delivered them again. Jonah prayed to God from where? Where was Jonah in his most famous prayer? In the belly of a whale.

He described it as the very depths of hell. And when he prayed, his prayer went from the depths of hell all the way up into God's holy temple.

[9 : 46] The presence of God. The prayer went all the way there. God heard. And God commanded the fish to spit Jonah out. Incredible, isn't it?

Can you believe it? God always hears prayer no matter how far away we feel. No matter how much we are struggling. No matter how far away from him we truly are.

In the New Testament, that pattern continues. The early Christians devoted themselves to prayer and God added to their number daily those who were being saved.

What amazing things happen when God's people pray, right? A church gathers to pray in Acts. Just a small congregation gathered in a home.

And why are they gathered to pray? Because Peter is in prison and he's facing death. And they are gathered and praying when all of a sudden their prayer meeting is interrupted by Peter.

[10 : 47] Because God has heard their prayers, has sent an angel to set Peter free and restore him to his church family. This is why the Heidelberg Catechism says that our prayers are more assuredly heard by God than we feel we actually desire what we're asking for.

That's why theologian J.I. Packer says God is always more ready to hear than we are to pray. See, when we feel prayer doesn't do anything, that assumes that we can see all the results, doesn't it?

We may not even be looking in the right direction. And often it assumes that prayer is about changing God, when in reality it's about changing us.

God uses prayer in our relationship with Him. It's part of the conversation. So He's using it in our relationship to bring His grace into our lives, which is impossible unless He hears.

His hearing our prayers is foundational. But then how? How is prayer actually a pathway of grace where we meet Jesus?

[12:12] Isn't it just something where we're asking God to do some stuff for us? Giving Him the list? Before that, prayer actually helps us to see our nature rightly.

It positions us appropriately in relationship to God. See, it's not just about getting something from God. In prayer, our hearts are reoriented.

They're reset. Hebrews 4 talks about our weaknesses. And it tells us we should draw near to God because we need His grace.

See, when you pray, you are posturing yourself toward God, not as the strong one in the relationship, right? Not as the one with the answers.

Not as the one calling the shots, but rather as the dependent one. That's the true nature of our relationship to God.

[13:18] See, that happens before God answers your prayer or does anything for you, doesn't it? I'm speaking merely of the grace of having your heart shaped in humility, which is needed and not natural for very independent, resourceful people like you and me.

Prayer slows us down. We're doing less in that moment, so we have to trust God more. And that's right. Jude reminds us in his letter that part of building yourself up in faith in God is praying as you wait for God.

Prayer teaches us even as we do it, not to rely on ourselves, but to place our trust in Him.

Recognizing this deep dependence, this great need for prayer is one of our core commitments as a church.

It's something we're committed to because it's so vital and we so quickly forget the blessing of coming to God as we truly should, empty-handed as weak people to a strong Father.

Many times we'd prefer to ignore that reality about ourselves. I really love the way theologian B.B. Warfield explained this over a hundred years ago.

[14:45] It's a bit long, but I think it's worth it. He's talking here about the impact of prayer on our hearts. What does it do to us as we pray?

He says, No one can take this attitude, this posture of dependent prayer, even once without an effect on his character. No one can take it in a crisis of his life without his whole subsequent life feeling the influence in its sweeter, humbler, more devout, and restful course.

No one can take it habitually without being made merely by its natural reflex influence a different man in a very profound sense from what he otherwise would have been.

Prayer, thus, in its very nature, because it is an act of self-abnegation, meaning of humbling ourselves, a throwing of ourselves at the feet of one recognized as higher and greater than we and as one on whom we depend and in whom we trust is a most beneficial influence in this hard life of ours.

How? How is it? It places the soul in an attitude of less self-assertion and predisposes it to walk simply and humbly in the world.

[16:16] As a result, it is impossible to conceive of a praying man, therefore, as destitute of grace. There's so much there.

Go back and read this later, but let me just ask you, would you benefit from walking more simply and humbly in this world? I would.

Start praying regularly. Throw yourself at the feet of the strong one. But Warfield's conclusion is really where I'm pushing us this morning to realize that it is impossible because of the nature of this relationship, it is impossible to conceive of a praying man as destitute of grace.

That they're inextricably connected, our prayers and God's grace coming to us. We don't merely pray for grace. In praying, we are actually experiencing grace.

See, prayer is doing something. It is making a difference in you even when you don't realize it. It's making you a different person. It's shaping your heart differently.

[17:32] It's posturing your entire life differently. Hear it from someone else who has long been with Jesus, Andrew Murray. Though in its beginnings, prayer is so simple that the feeble child can

pray, yet it is at the same time the highest and holiest work to which man can rise.

It is fellowship with the unseen and most holy one. The powers of the eternal world have been placed at its disposal. It is the very essence of true religion, the channel of all blessings, the secret of power and life.

The very essence of true religion, relationship with God, the channel of all blessings. It is the way we walk in his grace.

It is the way in which they come to us, the secret of power and life. It points our hearts and our lives to true north. It orients us correctly.

See, prayer is not just a lifeline to grab as a last resort in crisis when things are really spinning out of control. It is to be the life-giving air that we breathe moment by moment on our knees.

[18 : 46] We always, in every moment, need help. We're designed to be dependent on our God. Apart from me, you can do nothing, Jesus says.

So come to me and depend on me and live this way and talk with me. Imagine if that were actually true. Imagine that every morning before you could walk or talk or even drink coffee.

I know that some of you don't function right without your coffee, right? I won't ask for a show of hands. Many of you have confessed that to me. Imagine if in order to function the way you were made, you needed to call the helpline and you needed to get reset for the day to factory settings. You had to lie in your bed, call in, punch the numbers and get strength to even get started. You wouldn't forget, would you?

Not with coffee on the line. You wouldn't overlook it to think you were okay on your own, would you?

You wouldn't skip over it to get to more productive activities, would you?

[20 : 15] You wouldn't be able to. You wouldn't be able to do anything more productive until you did it. Prayer, see, sets our self-reliant hearts back in the right perspective.

It's part of why we need it so much. We are dependent. We are needy. We are the children. I can't do this life on my own. I have to start, God, in relationship with you, coming to you.

And if that's true, then it is equally important that the person who answers the helpline is actually helpful, isn't it?

That they don't put us on hold. That they can effectively address our needs. I mean, it is one thing to admit our need and to call in. But it's another to find the source of grace to meet that need.

To actually hear a voice on the other end. Someone who actually answers and really helps. How about this? What does Hebrews tell us?

[21 : 21] 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.

We need to draw near to, to walk closely with, to enjoy relationship with God because what is it that we need? We need grace.

And he sits where? On the throne of grace. He's reigning on the thing that is characterized by what we most need so we can expect to find with him mercy and grace.

Gifts that we don't deserve in all their forms that come through Jesus himself. Comfort. Right? Wisdom whenever we ask, he says.

Strength when we're weak. Peace when we're anxious. All of his various undeserved gifts that come to us through prayer.

[22 : 31] Whether we get the answer that we were specifically looking for or not because prayer reminds us about God, about who he is, that he is naturally by his very nature gracious and caring.

Even better than we sometimes expect he could be. Even better than we think we're experiencing him to be. Even better than we know how to ask him to be.

Cast all your anxieties on him because he cares for you. he cares for you.

That's the God to whom you pray. The pastor doesn't feel like that. I know. But it doesn't look like he's I know.

And he wants you to know he cares for you. That's why you can count when you come to him on finding grace.

[23 : 40] I don't know what the grace will look like but you can count on him for that. Andrew Murray again in the infinite tenderness and pity and patience of the infinite father.

What is he like? Infinitely tender and pitying and patient in his loving readiness to hear and to help the life of prayer has its joy.

That's where the joy comes from. I think this image is famous because it does such a great job of capturing that joy in our relationship with God.

John F. Kennedy was the most powerful man in the world. In the Oval Office sitting behind the Resolute desk very few people got an invitation to come in there with him, right?

Except John F. Kennedy Jr. pictured happily playing underneath the desk. What's going on? Why is he there? Who invited him in?

[24 : 51] His father did because he was his son with unparalleled access to his father. Look at how much fun he's having in that grand place of power.

But I want you to notice he's not the only one having fun. Look at the smile on his father's face. I think his father is enjoying his presence.

What a beautiful picture of our relationship with God who joyfully welcomes us into his presence. The throne room of heaven to the throne of grace because Jesus makes us his sons and daughters.

Amen. This is where he wants you to come. This is what you can expect to find on his face when you do. Just as we did for the Bible the last couple of weeks, we've put together some resources to help guide you in speaking to God.

This QR code is also in the bulletin so don't stress when it goes away. There are copies, hard copies if it helps you to have it printed in the narthex.

[26 : 08] But books or things to listen to or models for prayer that might help you if you're feeling stuck or frustrated right now in your conversation with God. Kids, you often teach us so much about how to pray.

It's the way we're supposed to relate to God as his children and so you often teach us in that. There are ideas here for you too that speak your language. I'm going to talk more about some of these next week but there are ways we can follow God's direction in turning our hearts toward him in regular conversation.

I want to encourage you as we're thinking about this just to give some attention to your prayer life, your walk with God, how you talk with him.

Think about one way in which you might be able to give attention to that. Maybe to change something, maybe to enrich something that you're doing even this summer.

We're going to talk next week through the Lord's Prayer one phrase at a time about the many different ways we pray, the different things we talk to God about.

[27 : 15] The way you pray doesn't need to look like the way I pray or the way someone else prays but there are a lot of different ways that God guides us, the different kinds of things we're to say when we're talking to him.

So we'll talk about that next week but for today I want to focus on just the very beginning of that prayer. We prayed it together earlier. I want you to remember the way the prayer starts.

That we're talking to whom when we pray? Our Father. Father. Our Father.

You're talking to your Father so before we talk next week about some things to say I don't want you to get too hung up on saying the right thing. If you're a father you know how secondary that is to just getting to talk with your child to hear what's on their heart.

He is listening in love. He's not here to critique your prayer. He loves hearing from his child. Puritan Thomas Watson.

[28 : 24] Were a man to petition his enemy there were little hope. But when a child petitions his father he may hope with confidence to succeed. The word Father works upon God.

It touches his very bowels. Right at the heart. See Jesus tells us to call God Father. Not only does he do it and do you think God hears and answers when Jesus prays to him?

Most of us would say yeah. Yeah. Yeah I think so. Jesus says you call my Father your Father.

You come to him with the same relationship because of what I have done for you. that is why we can confidently draw near to God because he calls us to come.

Let us with confidence draw near. Jesus knows our every weakness. We have a sympathetic high priest who has come down and met us and brought us back into the throne of grace confidently.

[29 : 38] Boldly. He says pick up the phone and say speak to a Father. Speak to a Father. Speak to a Father. And he answers. Oh what peace we often forfeit.

Oh what needless pain we bear. All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer. And we can come consistently over and over confidently in prayer because our Father delights to give good

gifts to his children.

That's grace. That's who he is. And he knows that there is no better gift that he can give us than his very self. Right after Jesus teaches us to pray the Lord's prayer he comes back in Luke 11 to talk about what it means that God is our Father.

And what his heart is and how he loves us like that. And he tells us that what God as our Father loves to do when we pray to him is to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.

To meet us with his very self. To walk with us. To listen to us. To remind us of his delight in our relationship.

[30 : 56] That he's so glad we're here. And talking with him again. That father-child relationship is designed even though we don't always experience it that way.

It's designed to be so close. So personal. That in the Old Testament you would never call God your father when you prayed.

It wasn't right. It wasn't okay. That was out of respect for his distinct holiness. That he was utterly beyond us.

But Jesus always calls God father when he prays. Every single time.

Every Father. My father. Father. Every time Jesus prays in scripture except one. Except one time.

[31 : 55] When Jesus is on the cross. and the wrath of God towards our sin is being poured out on him and Jesus cries out my God my God why have you forsaken me?

The only time he doesn't feel in the same way the nearness of his father. Why? Why did the father turn his face away?

so that his wounds Jesus wounds would bring many sons to glory.

Sons and daughters from every tribe and tongue and people and nation sitting here this morning that we would be brought to glory so that we would be welcomed under the desk into his presence to the very throne of grace so that we would be invited to sit at this table and share this meal with a God who is so holy that apart from him dealing with our sins we could never sit and eat with him the way he made us to and he made us for himself so he had to deal with our sins to have us back with him.

Jesus used this meal to explain what he was doing as he went to the cross. he sat with his disciples that night and he took bread and he broke it and he gave it to them as I ministering in his name give this bread to you he said take eat this is my body given for you do this in remembrance of me and then in the same way after supper he took the cup and he said to them this cup is the new covenant and my blood which is shed for many for the forgiveness of sins drink from it all of you for as often as you eat this bread and you drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes you say there is no other way for me to know my father than that his son would bring me into his presence if you have never trusted Jesus to pay for your sins to welcome you into relationship with your heavenly father or if you have but you're not willing today to be honest to approach him honestly about your sin to trust him to be the only one whose blood can cover you and forgive those sins then don't come eat this morning don't do something outwardly that you're not presently believing inwardly that's hypocrisy and God warns us against approaching him that way in relationship he welcomes us to come honestly we invite you this morning if you're in one of those places today not to come eat but we invite you to pray to talk with God about it to confess your sin even now to him we invite you to come let us pray with you to observe the body and blood of Jesus given for you we're so glad you're here wherever your heart is but if you are weak and needy and desperate and have no other way into relationship with God other than the blood of Jesus that you have trusted for yourself then you come confidently boldly to the throne of grace and to this table this morning because of

[35 : 35] Jesus not because you've been good not because you're a Presbyterian but because you have a father who delights in you as his child who sent his son for you so that you can confess your sins even now and receive his grace afresh as you take and eat and drink let's pray and we'll come do that together Jesus we're so humbled by your love that is so far beyond anything we could deserve that brings us into a place we never else could be except that you loved us and gave yourself for us would we come crawling would we stand on our knees boldly but humbly knowing there's no other way that we could be with you and for you to welcome us in use these very common elements to remind our doubting weak hearts that you have done it that it is finished and that we have a father who loves us do that work by your spirit we ask in the name of Jesus amen for more information visit us online at southwood.org