

"Our Great High Priest"

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Preacher: Alex Caulk

[0 : 0 0] Morning, church. Our passage this morning is from the book of Hebrews, chapter 4, verses 14 through 16. You can find this on page 943 of one of the Bibles in the pew in front of you.

If you're new to the Bible, the big numbers you see on the pages of the chapters and the small numbers are the verses, so you can also use that to help you navigate to the passage this morning. As you're finding your way there, let me open us up with a word of prayer.

Father God, we confess to you this morning that we are a people in need, in need of your salvation, your wisdom, your strength, your righteousness, and your comfort.

We ask that you would open our hearts and minds as we study your word together, teach us your ways, reveal to us our need for you, and make known to us the path that you forged so that we can be reconciled to you.

We pray these things in the name of Jesus, our great high priest. Amen. Well, I probably don't have to work very hard to convince you that suffering is something of a fundamental human experience.

[1 : 1 4] Everybody experiences suffering in different ways, but I don't think anybody could stand up with honesty and declare that they've lived a life or expect to live a life free from suffering.

Many books have been written trying to understand, address, and minimize our suffering, and it turns out one of those books is a popular bedtime book at our house right now. It's called *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*.

It's a wonderfully lighthearted exposition on how we experience, how we process, and how we respond to our suffering. It starts out with Alexander, a young schoolboy who wakes up one day to all kinds of irritating events.

And these events reveal to him the writing on the wall that today is indeed going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. And as you might imagine, his prophecy is progressively fulfilled over the course of his otherwise ordinary activities.

In a single day, Alexander's subjected to every kind of misfortune that a young child could dream of. There's the disappointment of the cereal box with no prize, embarrassment in the school hallways as he's demoted from best friend to third best friend, a health scare when the dentist finds a cavity, the injustice of being forced to buy the plain old white sneakers instead of the ones that he actually wants.

[2 : 4 2] And what's so entertaining about this story is the light that it sheds on how we're naturally disposed to respond in these situations. In the face of injustice, he rebels, declaring they can buy him the shoes, but they can't make him wear them.

When confronted with disappointment, he longs to retreat far, far away to Australia. When his best friend demotes him, he curses him, wishing that his ice cream would fall off the cone and land far away in Australia.

And the dentist? Well, he won't have the opportunity to fix that cavity because it turns out that Alexander is scheduled to be in, of all places, Australia during his appointment.

We can probably all see a little bit of Alexander in ourselves, right? So what's the lesson of the story here? After a day of tragedy after tragedy befalling Alexander, feeling tired, dejected, and alone, he lays his head on his pillow and declares that it has indeed been a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day, to which his mother lovingly replies, some days are just like that, even in Australia.

On the one hand, this is a great lesson to learn for children and adults. There are two things asserted here. The first is pretty explicit. Bad days are going to happen, and there's not much you can do about it.

[4 : 1 1] The second is more implied. Not every day is going to be a bad day, and tomorrow is a new day. The real lesson is that we can persevere through our bad days in hope of the better days

that are to come.

And this is a wonderfully practical lesson that everybody certainly needs to learn, but it stops short a bit, doesn't it? Aren't there some underlying questions that still need to get answered?

Is it really just chance that today was a bad day? Do I have any control over my bad days? What if my bad day turns into a bad week, or a bad month, or a bad year?

And if persevering is the way to handle my bad day, where do I get the strength, and what am I persevering toward? These are deep questions that require rich answers, and our text today has a lot to say about this.

So again, turn in your Bibles with me or follow along on the screen as I read our passage, Hebrews chapter 4, verses 14 through 16. Since then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, that has hold fast our confession.

[5 : 26] 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. Well, before we dive in, it's helpful to back up just a little bit and get some context about the book of Hebrews.

This book was likely written to a group of Jewish Christians who were suffering under political pressure and persecution on account of their newly found faith. The letter is meant to be an exhortation and an encouragement, an exhortation to persevere, to not forsake their God and Savior in response to their persecution, and also an encouragement that God himself is faithful to sustain us, to equip us, and to shape us through our suffering.

So we're picking up in a passage that's about a third of the way through the letter, and the author's already been building up to this point in his argument. He's expounded on the person and the work of Jesus as superior in every way.

The person of Jesus is called the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, higher than angels, and the one true Son of God. And the work of Jesus is that he has made purification for our sins because he led a perfectly faithful and obedient life and then suffered and died as the perfect and superior sacrifice for our sake.

[7 : 10] Jesus' nature and his work, we're told, make him the greatest high priest, greater even than Moses, with the job of rescuing humanity and the creation that was his from the start.

And it's because of the person and work of Jesus that we have an opportunity to enter into a rest for the people of God. And up to now in our passage, this opportunity seems to be at risk because of the temptation to forsake their newly found faith.

So now we arrive at our passage, which starts, since then we have a great high priest. The author is saying, since Jesus is so great and since he died for you and for me and since your suffering is tempting you to reject the rest that God has offered, listen to what I'm about to say.

In a nutshell, the author is going to tell us that Jesus, as our all-sufficient high priest, supplies us with everything we need to rightly interpret, process, and respond to our suffering and temptation in times of trial.

So in asking, what do we do in the face of suffering and temptation, our passage lays out three helpful steps. First, confess our weaknesses. Second, cling to our great high priest.

[8 : 26] And third, come to the throne for help. Confess our weaknesses, cling to our great high priest, and come to the throne for help. So in verse 14, the first verse in our passage, the author calls us to hold fast our confession.

And what is this confession that we're supposed to be holding on to so tightly? At a high level, it's referring to holistic confession of gospel teaching, confessing the person and the work of Jesus Christ as we just talked about.

The more specific context of our passage, though, suggests that this confession has something to do with temptation and suffering. So in this explicit and ultimate confession of who Jesus is and what he's done for us, there's also an implicit and contextual confession about who we are in relation to Jesus.

We're confessing here that Jesus is strong and faithful while we are weak and wayward. As we consider these terms, suffering, weakness, and temptation, let's try to outline their definitions and their relationships to one another to sort of help ground the discussion.

First, suffering. If we want to know how to rightly understand and respond to our suffering, then the best starting point is to define what we mean by suffering. For our purposes, it'll be helpful to cast suffering as directly experiencing that the world is not as it should be and recognizing that it's not within our power to change it.

[10 : 05] We might experience loneliness, sickness, separation, or death, and it's natural to feel that there's something not right about our experiences in the world.

And what's more, because we're part of this natural and created world, this brokenness, this sin, is not just around us, it's also within us.

And whether it's sin in the world or sin in ourselves, it often seems as though we're powerless to fix it. And this realization can produce a great deal of distress.

So if suffering is recognizing and experiencing that the world is not as it should be, then it seems that our suffering stems in part from our second term, weakness.

Now, weakness in and of itself is not actually a bad thing. All of us have weaknesses, and the Genesis account clearly outlines that by virtue of being created, that we are not God and therefore not self-sufficient.

[11 : 08] There are some things, many things, in fact, that we just can't do ourselves. We were created to be fully dependent on God, and that was meant for our good and for God's glory.

Where our weakness becomes a potential problem is when temptation enters the picture. The brokenness within us and around us presses in on our weaknesses and drives a temptation to turn from God and look for our own solution to our problems.

If then our faith in God is marked by a joyful and confident dependence on our Creator, then when sin enters the equation, our faith is challenged by temptation and suffering, threatening to rob our joy and our confidence in God's care and provision for us.

So now we've arrived at our third term, temptation. What does temptation actually look like? The majority of temptations, I think, can be boiled down to doubting God and more specifically doubting His goodness, His sovereignty, or both.

Maybe God is so good that He wants the best for me, but He must not be powerful enough to make it happen. Or alternatively, maybe God is so powerful that He could make everything perfect for me, but He must not love me enough to care to do it.

[12 : 37] In either case, when we're suffering, it can quickly feel as though God is uninterested in or unable to resolve what's wrong in our lives.

But Jesus is very clear, though. In John chapter 16, He says, in the world, you will have tribulation, but take heart. I have overcome the world.

If we have Jesus as our great high priest, then we have an infinitely capable and caring master who's gone before us in our suffering. And in doing so, He's overcome the darkness in the world so that sorrow might be turned to joy.

But doubt can begin to creep in, even for the most faithful among us. Sometimes the doubt leads us to question God's provision for us and we're tempted to take control for ourselves.

The temptation always sounds something like, if I don't do this thing for myself, then I'll never experience the full joy that I desire. So better get to work finding the right spouse, getting a good job, making a good living, raising a good family, taking care of your body, taking care of your community.

[13 : 50] Otherwise, we'll never find our true fulfillment. Right? Now, these things are all certainly good things to pursue, but remember our confession.

The world is broken and so are we. So what happens when despite our best efforts, we're unable to accomplish these goals for our lives?

If these are the things that bring true joy, where are we left without them? Well, friends, we suffer greatly because at the end of the day, we've recognized the brokenness in our world and we put our faith in something that can't ultimately fix the problem.

But suffering doesn't come only when we give in to temptation, but even and sometimes especially as we resist temptation, we might find ourselves dealing with a chronic health condition, a struggling marriage, chronic unemployment, and the like.

And it's here that we might feel as though we've reached the end of our spiritual endurance. It's natural to find ourselves asking with the psalmists, how long, oh Lord?

[15:06] And it's important to recognize that even in this, there is a rightness to confessing our weakness and our temptation to despair. Consider again the passage that was read this morning from Lamentations, starting in verse 17.

My soul is bereft of peace. I have forgotten what happiness is. So I say, my endurance has perished. So has my hope from the Lord.

Even in the midst of great perseverance through trials and suffering, you might find in your weakness that you feel as though you can't persevere any longer. And you begin to doubt if even the Almighty God is big enough to pull you out of your deep well of suffering.

But the beauty of the gospel is that when God reaches into our lives and pulls us out of the darkness and into the light, we're raised to a new spiritual life. And like any new life, the starting point involves a lot of weakness.

And so, from the start, God begins in us a very good work of sanctification or molding us into the people that he's created us to be. This looks a lot like a lifelong spiritual workout kind of challenging a muscle to make it stronger.

[16:29] There are many ways in which our faith is weak and we're not at all aware of it until God graciously intervenes in our lives to issue a challenge to those muscles.

But you can be sure that whatever difficulty or injury you sustain in the process of this workout, he'll be there to carry you through the entire thing.

So when we suffer, we said we should confess our weaknesses, but is that it? Do we just finally fess up and then everything is magically better?

Well, turn back again with me to our passage from Lamentations, picking up in verse 21. But this I call to mind and therefore I have hope. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.

His mercies never come to an end. They're new every morning. Great is your faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, says my soul.

[17:33] Therefore, I will hope in Him. You see, as we confess our weaknesses and our waywardness, we ought not to get weighed down by our sin and by our weaknesses, kind of dwelling on the ways in which we're not strong enough or smart enough or good enough.

Rather, when we're confessing our weaknesses to the Lord, we're confessing to the one who is infinitely strong, completely sovereign, and perfectly good all of the things that we are not we find in lamentations that our endurance has perished, but the mercy and the faithfulness of the Lord is unending, and as long as we cling to Him as our portion, our weakness is not the end of us.

And this leads us to our second point. We said, to rightly understand and respond to our suffering, we have to first confess our weaknesses and temptations, and second, we have to cling to our great high priest.

This is part of the since then in verse 14, let us hold fast or cling to Him, our great high priest, who is indeed our confession.

And verse 15 expounds on why we can and should do this. It says, 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.

[19:00] So what is a high priest exactly? We said we should be confessing to the Lord, but the problem in the Old Testament was that because of our sin, there was no way to actually stand in the presence of an infinitely holy God to proceed with the confession.

So God, in His mercy, appointed one high priest who each year would go into the room in the tabernacle where God was dwelling, and He would offer sacrifices on behalf of Himself, and all of the people of Israel.

If we look ahead to chapter 5 in Hebrews, it says, 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. This high priest was a person who was well acquainted with weakness and could therefore effectively empathize with and advocate for those in His community who would confess their own weaknesses.

Only this one person who was appointed by God could go into His presence to offer the necessary sacrifices for Himself and for the people. These sacrifices were meant to be an acknowledgement and repentance of our weakness and sinfulness in the sight of the Lord as well as a reminder that the ultimate consequence of sin is death.

[20 : 32] But it was also a reminder of God's faithfulness, a reminder that God had intervened to cover over our iniquity so that we could be reconciled to Him.

In these sacrifices, God was graciously transferring our record of sin to another and wiping our slate clean. Of course, this sacrificial procedure had to continue annually because the sacrifices were never really enough to cover over everyone's sins once and for all.

No single high priest could ever be the eternal high priest until Jesus. God came to dwell with His creation in human form so that He might live the perfect life, become the perfect sacrificial offering, and secure His status as the eternal high priest.

And importantly, this was going to require suffering. Hebrews tells us that Jesus is the founder and perfecter of our faith and He was made perfect by the suffering which He endured on our behalf. You see, by joining His own creation, God was eliminating any claim that He is a distant God, that He's somehow aloof and uninterested in our suffering.

[21 : 55] Rather, He is so interested in His creation that He joined it, experiencing in full every form of weakness, temptation, and suffering that we have experienced and more, and yet without sin.

And He did this all for the sake of our reconciliation to Him. Consider Matthew 4 where we find Jesus in the wilderness after fasting for 40 days and 40 nights.

And the passage says that He was hungry. Makes sense. Satan leverages that weakness to challenge to challenge Jesus' faith by seeding doubt and tempting Him to use His power to turn stones into bread and meet His own physical needs.

Certainly, this temptation to doubt God's provision must have yielded some physical suffering. Later in Matthew, we see as Jesus is knowingly approaching His own execution, He tells His disciples that His soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.

And later, as He hung on the cross, scorned, hated, and despised, Jesus quotes the Psalms in His darkest moment saying, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

[23 : 19] Can you hear the agony in Jesus' words? Friends, if this isn't a temptation to doubt God and to despair in our circumstances, I don't know what is.

And yet, Jesus remains faithful to the bitter end, and in doing so, He bears the ultimate experience that we deserved, separation from our Creator.

Importantly, the mere fact that Jesus suffered greatly did not diminish the effectiveness of His ministry, His standing before God, or His sufficiency as the ultimate sacrifice.

On the contrary, He is our great High Priest because of His suffering. He's merciful to us through His suffering, and He's the perfect sacrifice for us by His suffering.

So if the perfect Holy Creator can enter into our suffering with us and redeem that very suffering for our good and His glory, then ought we not view our own suffering with hope.

[24 : 30] Jesus' life, death, and resurrection mean that He is not only the perfect sacrifice for our sins, but also the conqueror of sin and death and the risen, eternal High Priest.

Our sin was laid upon Him, and because of His great love for us, He advocates for us at the throne of God so that when God looks at us, He doesn't see our sin, but He sees Jesus' righteousness, and He welcomes us into fellowship with Him.

And this leads us to our final point. If we confess our weakness and we cling to our great High Priest, then by His merit, we can come to the throne for help. We're encouraged in 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.

You see, the one who was faithful until the bitter end was faithful so that we could be reconciled to God. And part of being reconciled to God means being regenerated into the person that God created us to be, a process called sanctification.

This process isn't easy. Scripture compares it to a refiner's fire, a process of melting down a metal such as gold for purification purposes. The refiner would apply heat to the metal and the impurities or the dross would rise to the surface for removal so that the only thing remaining was the precious metal itself.

[26 : 01] Sanctification is a similar process for us. The heat applied can be painful indeed, but we can rest assured that the heat exists with the explicit purpose of filtering sin and brokenness from our lives.

And here's the thing. Jesus was so perfectly faithful that he willingly died to reconcile us to God. And if part of that reconciliation requires sanctification, then the one who is perfectly faithful, totally

sovereign, and completely loving must certainly be faithful to complete the good work that he's begun in us.

Think about it this way. Imagine going to a flea market and stumbling upon something that's nearly priceless. Maybe it's a rare jewel, a historic painting, or a memento of some iconic figure that you greatly admire.

And in your excitement, you pay a massive price to possess this treasure. Now, you're at the flea market, so this thing's been out in the elements for quite some time, and so it's pretty banged up. It's got dirt all over it. It's covered in scratches and dents. It's just totally worn down. And now that you've got it, you have a choice. You can clean it up so that you can put it on display so that everyone can see it and admire its beauty and magnificence.

[27 : 21] Or you can leave it broken, dirty, and haggard only to continue degrading in its current form until it's completely unrecognizable. What are you going to do?

Obviously, you're going to clean it up, right? I mean, what sense would it make to pay a great price for a wonderful treasure and never care for it, leaving it to decay? Friends, the God who is faithful considered us, his creation, to be so valuable that he was willing to empty himself completely to save us, even as we were covered in complete sin and brokenness.

And this same God promises us that he is fully committed to our sanctification. Certainly, this God must also be compassionate enough to meet us and sustain us through our moments of suffering. But this doesn't relieve us of our personal responsibility to persevere in our faith. So, what do we do? What does it mean to approach the throne of grace as it says in verse 16?

Well, on one level, it's important to recognize that we are physical beings living in a broken world. And by common grace, God's revealed many ways that we can manage the experiences of our brokenness.

[28 : 40] Maybe it's diet and exercise, counseling, modern medicine, or other avenues of physical care. And just as we know that God designed our bodies to function with certain inputs, he also designed us as people to function as a community and not as individuals.

We're called to be a people of community so that we can one another well. God never intended that we should experience hardship and suffering and isolation, but rather he knew that in our weakness, we would need support.

We receive our support principally through him, but one of the ways in which he meets needs is through those whom he's called to a community. So if you're struggling, find a trusted friend or mentor.

Share openly about your temptations and your suffering. Open the door for God to work in your life through others that have been shaped by his grace through their own trials and tribulations.

And tribulations. But at its core, when we talk about approaching the throne for help, it means approaching God in the ways that he's instructed us, reading his word and praying regularly.

[30 : 00] God's revealed himself to us through his word, both his written word and the living word, Jesus Christ, and through his word, we're instructed to be anxious about nothing but by prayer and supplication and with thanksgiving to submit a request to God.

And the promise, the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Jesus gives us an example of what it looks like to do this in our moments of suffering.

In the garden of Gethsemane, as he awaits his executioners, he prays, My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.

You see, Jesus is fully immersed in the weakness of humanity in this moment and in the weakness of the flesh, he's confronted with significant temptation to defect from God's ultimate plan.

He certainly had the power to escape, but in faithful submission, he says, not as I will, but as you will. This is our ultimate prayer because we know that the will of the one who is faithful is a will for our sanctification, for our eternal good and his glory.

[31 : 24] And what could be better than that? I wonder if you're struggling today with suffering, temptation, or despair. Maybe you miss a loved one or you're longing for connection or companionship.

Maybe you lost your job, received a difficult health diagnosis, or maybe you're battling addiction or depression. whatever it is, don't relent in your faith.

Persevere. Hold fast your confession. Continue reading the scripture. Continue praying. Continue gathering together and continue worshiping.

Remember that by confessing our weaknesses and clinging to Jesus, we have confidence in the purpose of our suffering and the right to boldly ask for help in our time of need.

Jesus has gone before us and walks with us through our suffering and the one who is perfectly faithful will not forsake us as we endure the fog and the fire of sanctification.

[32 : 37] One commentator says it well, sanctification is glory begun and glory is sanctification completed. Friends, any suffering we experience serves only to promote the sanctification which God has for us and the very nature of sanctification is that it's temporary and it's purposeful.

Sanctification is a process with a clear and amazing end. It's moving us toward glory, a glory where there's no more suffering and where we finally end up where we were created to be, resting in the presence of our Creator and Lord.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you that because of your great love, you joined us in our suffering and went before us to forge a path of reconciliation and regeneration.

and we thank you that by the power of the blood of Jesus we can boldly approach you to ask for your help in our great times of need. We ask that your peace would be a reality to us and that we would not grow weary by the trials and temptations of this life but that we would look confidently and joyously to the day of ultimate redemption when we can rest in glory with you.

We pray this in the name of our great high priest Jesus Christ. Amen.