

Incomparable Greatness, Inexhaustable Kindness

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[0 : 0 0] But I'd like us to spend a little bit of time back in Hebrews chapter 4. I'm sure that everyone here would agree that life is full of challenges. If you think back to last week or the last month, I'm sure that at home, at work, in school or in terms of the other responsibilities that you carry, if you think of all of those things, ask yourself the question, was everything easy or were some things hard? And I'm sure it's the case that for all of us, whether it's in school, at work, in friendships, in relationships, in families, often life is challenging. That's true in any walk of life. It's also true as Christians. Following Jesus is brilliant, but that does not mean that it is always easy. And in those moments when we are confronted by challenges, we can often find ourselves facing a huge temptation. And that's the temptation to give up. So you think about getting a hard sheet of maths at school, loads of sums that are really hard, you're struggling with them, you feel like giving up. You look at your inbox on a Monday morning, your emails are just bursting, you feel like just turning the computer back off again. Or when you are getting up in the morning feeling as worn out as when you went to bed, often when we are confronted by challenges, we are plagued by the temptation that it will be easier to just give up. When we feel like that, the letter to the Hebrews is a brilliant place to go because that's exactly how the people who received this letter were feeling. These Hebrew Christians had begun to follow Jesus, but now it looks as though they were tempted to give up and go back to their old Jewish religion. And this is why the great message of Hebrews is don't give up, keep going. Or as the writer often says, hold fast your confession. In other words, don't let go of what you have believed and what you have committed to. I don't know if any of you are watching the Tour de France. There's loads of lots of sport on just now, but one of my favourite sporting events is the Tour de France, a big cycling race every year all through France. And you've got about 150 or so cyclists going about 160, 180 miles every day over three weeks. One of the things that they often have to do is go up enormous hills. And if you imagine going up a hill, a huge hill on a bike, it can be so tempting to give up. And it must be incredibly hard for these cyclists who are just going up huge steep mountains on their bikes. But what I didn't realise and what

I just heard a few weeks ago was that all of these cyclists on the Tour de France have got earpieces in their ear. So there's loads of technology involved now. They've got a little earpiece so that the team can communicate with them and tell them what happens. And my brother was watching a documentary where he said that it showed the team car where the person was talking into these earpieces. So the cyclist has an earpiece and in the car behind them they've got people talking to them. And he was saying that when they reached the big hill, the guy in the car was shouting in their ear saying, go, go, go, you can do it. Don't give up. Keep going. Don't stop. Keep going. Keep going. And he was pouring encouragement into the earpiece of this cyclist as he was going up this really steep hill. The letter to the Hebrews is a bit like that. It is an avalanche of incredible theology to help you keep going. I want us to focus today on chapter four. We're going to look especially at the verses that are on the screen from four to 11. Let me just pick up the reading at verse 14. Since then we have a great high priest who's passed through the heavens.

Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession, for we do not have a high priest who's unable to sympathise 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 find mercy, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. The letter to the Hebrews is made up of lots of different comparisons between Jesus and the Old Testament.

So he's compared with things like the Old Testament leaders, Old Testament priesthood, Old Testament sacrifices, and it's all to show that Jesus is the better version of all of these things. They were all shadows. Jesus has now fulfilled it all. And so the argument of the letter is that if Jesus is better than all of these shadows, why would you want to give up following Jesus and go back to the

old ways? In chapter three and four, which we read, the comparison is with Moses, the Exodus, and entry into the Promised Land. So that's kind of from Exodus, the Viticus Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua in the Old Testament. And then it moves on at the end of chapter four to start comparing Jesus with the priesthood. And that continues from chapter five onwards in the letter here. So in the passage that we read, the writer wants us to think back to the Exodus. And when Moses led the people out of slavery in Egypt and towards the

[5 : 58] Promised Land, and you may remember that they fled from Egypt, they moved towards the Promised Land, they reached the border, they were ready to enter, and the people rebelled. And they refused to believe that God would help them conquer the land. And instead, they just wanted to go back.

And you can read about it all in Numbers 14. In Hebrews chapter three, the writer quotes from Psalm 95, which is talking all about this incident. David refers to it to warn people not to give up. And you can see that in verses seven to 11. Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, today if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart as in the rebellion, the rebellion, that's that moment in the exes on the day of testing in the wilderness. He is saying, do not give up like they did. So there's two important points being raised, well, at least two. One, the writer is saying that we must recognize the mistake that the Israelites made. When things got tough for them, they gave up. He's saying, don't do that. And two, he is saying that we must recognize what all of this is pointing towards. The Promised Land in the Old Testament was going to be the great resting place for the people. They had been slaves, slaves. Now they were refugees. The Promised Land would finally give them rest, but that didn't happen. As verse eight in chapter four implies, Joshua, who eventually led them into the land, did not give them rest. And he wasn't meant to, because all of these Old Testament events were shadows. They're all pointing to the full reality, the coming of Jesus Christ. He's the better leader than Moses, the greater conqueror than Joshua.

He's the one who gives an eternal resting place. Or as four nine says, a Sabbath rest for the people of God. All of that means that for the, the Hebrew Christians, the ultimate goal and the resting place is still ahead of them. It'll come when Jesus brings them home into an eternal rest.

And that's why the great message of this letter is keep going. Don't give up. And this is where we see a very important, but maybe a wee bit of a subtle point. When things are tough in our lives, one of the big reasons we want to give up is because we think that it will give us a rest.

[8 : 42] So imagine again that you're cycling up a big hill or walking up a big hill. You think to yourself, if I just give up, then I'll be able to rest. But in the Christian life, rest does not come through giving up and abandoning our faith. Rest comes through pressing on. And that's the great message of this chapter and this letter as 4 11 says, we must strive forwards and not fall into the same trap. You can see it on the screen there in verse 11. We need to strive forward, not fall into the same trap. That's the great instruction that the writer is giving to these Hebrews and that he's giving to us. But why should you do that? In all the struggles and challenges of life, why should you keep going as a Christian? And if you're not yet a committed follower of Jesus, why should you bother even starting? Well, that's what I want us to focus on.

And in particular, I want to look at the verses that are on the screen before you, because here, the writer gives us two massive reasons to keep going as Christians or to get going if you haven't started following him yet. And you can spot them because you can see that there's a since then, in verse 14, and there's a far in verse 15. And that kind of language means that reasons or explanations are being given to back up what is being said. And together, these two reasons give us two utterly amazing truths about Jesus. And what I hope is that these two truths will be a big help to us all in the week ahead. So number one, in Jesus, we see incomparable greatness.

As we've been saying throughout this letter, the writer is making comparisons between Jesus and the great people and great events of the Old Testament. But it was all to show that even though there was great stuff in the Old Testament, Jesus is greater than it all. In fact, Jesus is what everything in the Old Testament is pointing towards. He's greater than Moses, greater than Joshua. And in verse 14, the next comparison is introduced to say that Jesus is the great high priest. And the next chapter expand on that all the way through to chapter 9 and 10.

The key point in it all is that in Jesus, we see incomparable greatness. And there is so much I would love to explore with you about that. I have to just pick one thing. I want to unpack a phrase in verse 14, where it says that he passed through the heavens. Now back in the Old Testament, approaching God was almost impossible. There were massive restrictions around drawing near to

God.

Ordinary people could not just approach him or draw near to him. Instead, there had to be a representative who would approach God on behalf of the people. So Moses did that for the people at Mount Sinai. He went up the mountain into God's presence. But everybody else had to stay back. [12:06] In fact, they were told don't even touch the mountain. Later in the Old Testament, the high priest did it. God's presence was in the center of the temple in the most holy place. But only the high priest could go in there. And even then it was only once a year. Approaching God was highly restricted. And it was always through a priestly mediator who came into God's presence on behalf of the people. But even the greatest Old Testament figures could only come so far and no more.

Jesus is different. Jesus is the great high priest. He has gone right into the very presence of God. Or as verse 14 says, he's passed right through the heavens. And that's pointing us to the fact that Jesus has entered right into the presence of God on our behalf in order to represent us and to mediate for us. So just imagine that you could line up Moses and the Old Testament high priests and ask them how far into God's presence did you go? Imagine you could line them up.

I've got a wee picture on the screen here to picture that for us. Moses would say, well, I went to the top of Mount Sinai. So we could put Moses on a wee bit. The high priest could say, we went into the inner sanctuary of the temple. But Jesus can say, I passed through the heavens.

In other words, he went further than any other. He went all the way into the eternal dwelling place of God. And the question that the writer to the Hebrews wants us to ask is, which one's the greatest? But what's maybe even more amazing, well, what's definitely even more amazing is that Jesus didn't do that for his own benefit. He did it for yours. He did it as our representative, our great high priest. And this, of course, is taking us to the very heart of how Christianity works. As verse 13 reminds us, you can see it on the screen there, every one of us is accountable before God. We are naked and exposed before him. We're completely unworthy of him. We cannot approach him. So because we can't, Jesus does it for us. He is our representative before God.

And through everything that he has achieved, through his death and resurrection, we now have access to God through him. And as I said, if you read through chapters five to 10 of Hebrews, you get a wonderful explanation of how it all works. If you read it and have any questions, please don't ever hesitate to ask. The key point is that in Jesus, we now have what used to be impossible. We have access to God. And that's why in verse 16, it can talk about us drawing near to God's throne with confidence. Now, it is so easy for us to miss the magnitude of these words.

[15:15] I want you to imagine that you could travel back in time and visit the Israelites as they stood together at the bottom of Mount Sinai in the wilderness. You can read about in Exodus chapter 19. I want you to imagine that you're there. This huge company of Israelites, Moses, has gone to the top of the mountain. At that moment, that mountain is covered in smoke. The ground is shaking and the message is clear. God is meeting Moses up there. Don't dare go anywhere near this mountain. And I want you to imagine that you could walk up to a trembling Israelite who's looking on to all that's happening. And you could walk up to him and say, I can draw near to God quite confidently.

The Israelite would be dumbfounded. But you would be absolutely right. And it is all because of the incomparable greatness of Jesus. In him, we have this astonishing access to God and God forbid that we ever forget what an extraordinary privilege that is, or that we ever forget the immense cost at which it came. And of course, that's just one aspect of the greatness of Jesus. He's greater than everything else in the Old Testament as well. So the Old Testament is full of great victories. Jesus is greater. He defeated death itself. The Old Testament is full of sacrifices.

Jesus is greater. The cross was a once for all offering to make atonement for sin. The OT is full of great heroes. Jesus is greater. In fact, he's the one that they were all looking towards in faith. The Old Testament is full of great teaching. Jesus is greater. He's the one who brings it all together and fully reveals what God wants us to know. Jesus is greater than all of it. And that is why it is no surprise at all that Jesus is the single most influential person in all of history. And that, of course, is why if anybody thinks that you can just muck about with Jesus, or pick him up and put it down, or dabble with him, or ignore him, if anyone thinks like that, then you are theologically off your head. Because it means that in terms of approaching God and eternity and life and death, you're effectively saying, I think I can actually do better myself.

So how should we respond to it? Well, when we talk about the incomparable greatness of Jesus, our instinctive answer might be to think, well, we should admire him, we should worship him, we

should honor him. And of course, that is what we should do. And we're meeting together at the start of a new week to do exactly that, to publicly worship and honor Jesus. We never want to stop. And that's a good response. But in terms of how we should respond to this, Hebrews 4 actually focuses on something else. And that brings us to the second great truth I want to highlight. In Jesus, we see incomparable greatness. But in Jesus, we also see inexhaustible kindness. Hebrews 4 is such an awesome chapter, because just as the writer takes us to the very heights of the incomparable greatness of Jesus, he then gives us the incredible reassurance of verses 15 and 16. Remember, this letter is written to Christians who are tempted to give up. They're struggling, they're weak. And you would think that the writer would have felt like saying, you know, look at the greatness of Jesus, it's incompatible. So get your act together, stop letting him down and make sure you keep going. But he doesn't say that at all. He says that the incomparable greatness of Jesus means that there is never ever a moment or a situation when he cannot sympathize with your weaknesses. And when you cannot run straight to him for help. In other words, he's telling us that in Jesus, we see inexhaustible kindness. Again, there's so much I would love to explore. I want to just pick out two or three key words from these verses. The first word is the word sympathize. That basically means fellow feeling. And so that means that it combines knowledge and compassion. Jesus knows how you feel. And he cares about the fact that you feel that way. So however you are feeling right now, Jesus knows he understands and he has sympathy with you. Second, I want to highlight the words not and unable. You can see them in verse 15. That's a double negative. That's talking about Jesus's ability. Now in any part of life, we can reach the point where we can't continue. Our power runs out, our ability reaches its limits, our resources run dry. That can be in terms of work, volunteering, learning, exercise. There's always a point where things just go beyond our ability. And that can be especially true when it comes to helping people or supporting them when they're struggling. Often we can be initially very willing to help, but it's hard to sustain it. It's hard to keep on showing sympathy. It's hard to never become impatient. There's always a point when we run out of strength ourselves, but never, never, never with Jesus. When it comes to being sympathetic and kind towards you, Jesus is never, ever unable to do it. Both in terms of his ability, he has the strength and resources, but also in terms of experience, which brings us to the third key word, the word tempted. In every respect, he has been tempted as we are. And again, I wish we had more time to look at this. I just want to recognize the fact that these words are telling you that Jesus knows what it is like to face the temptations that you face. Maybe another day we'll look into that a little bit more to explain why. Today I simply want you to recognize this truth. When you are tempted, whatever it is, you can pray, Lord Jesus, you know what this is like, and I really need your help. Every respect means exactly that. That's reminding us that temptation is not a sin. In fact, it's reminding us that temptation is actually part of exposure to temptation. I think we can actually say it's part of our human dignity. The fact that we engage in that moral battle to resist what is wrong is a great reminder of the dignity that God has endowed upon us. It's very easy to think that struggling with temptation is a bad sign. I want to suggest to you that it isn't. Struggling with it is a good sign because it shows that you know right from wrong, and that there's part of you that desperately wants to avoid the path that leads to sin, even though it's full of attractions.

[22 : 56] Of course, this is where we see yet another remarkable contrast between the way God thinks and the way the culture around us thinks. Today, often the language of dignity is used today as a reason to indulge our temptations. I should get what I want because that shows that you respect my dignity as a human. The truth is the opposite. Our human dignity is seen not when we indulge our temptations, but when we resist them. And that's why Jesus is the perfect example of a human. He was tempted in every way that we are yet without sin. All of this is telling us that none of these words were written for people who are feeling amazing. They're written for the times when we are feeling rubbish. Hebrews 4 is not written for people who never think about giving up. It's written for people who are plagued with the feeling that they want to give up. And that is why the throne that Jesus gives us to is a throne of grace. It's a throne where we find grace and help in time of need. And in many ways, those three words, throne of grace, sum up everything that I've been trying to say. It's a throne because Jesus is incomparably great. But it's a throne of grace because Jesus is inexhaustibly kind. He's reigning over all. There is none like him. And it's absolutely incredible what he has done. But that does not mean for one second that you have to impress him with your greatness. It means that there is never a second when you cannot run to him in your weakness. In those moments when you feel incomparably rubbish about yourself, you can go

straight to him and discover that he is inexhaustibly kind. As we said at the start, life is full of challenges. Maybe this week that's passed has been a tough week for you. Maybe the week that comes is going to be. Often the result of that is that our confidence can take a battering.

And often as Christians, our confidence just seems to evaporate. Sometimes we feel like giving up. Our confidence can hit rock bottom. But the last thing I want to show you is one more thing from verse 16. So just look at those verses again and let me ask you the question. When can you have the most confidence before God? In times of success, in times of strength, in times of spectacular answers to prayer, in times when everything is going great, no, these times are often rare in the Christian life. The time when you can have most confidence is in the times when you feel most needy. And that is where we yet again discover that so often theology is at its most awesome for those moments when our feelings are at their most rubbish. I want to leave you with two questions to think about. Number one, are you tempted to think that Jesus isn't great enough? Not great enough to save you, not great enough to be worth the cost of following, not great enough to help you with the week ahead. Are you tempted to sometimes think that Jesus isn't great enough? And the second question I want you to take away to think about is, are you tempted to think that Jesus isn't kind enough? So your temptations are maybe too embarrassing or too awful. Your feelings are maybe too numerous. Or maybe you think that you can find a better comfort somewhere else. Are you tempted to think that Jesus isn't kind enough? May Hebrews 4 be like that earpiece in your ear. Constantly reminding you that Jesus is incomparably great and he is inexhaustibly kind. Amen. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we acknowledge that you are incomparably great, our great high priest, our great pioneer, our great saviour, and we worship you. And we also thank you that you are inexhaustibly kind. And help us never to forget these two things. And may they be a constant comfort to us in the week ahead. And may our thoughts, words and conduct be shaped in light of these truths for this week and for the rest of our lives. We pray for everyone here who's struggling, that they would know your incomparable greatness and your inexhaustible kindness. Amen.