

A Great High Priest

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[0 : 0 0] We're looking this evening at Hebrews chapter 4.

So if you'll turn with me in your Bibles, the Hebrews chapter 4 will be looking at verses 15 and 16 in particular. Before we read verses 14 to 16, let me just pray for us.

Heavenly Father, we pray that you'd give us ears to hear now what your spirit says to us in your Word. Please convict us where we've grown cold to the Gospel.

Please give, breathe warmth into our hearts. And Lord, we pray that you'd strengthen us by this. Lord, we pray that your words that we hear now will be truly heard as your words and they'll be food for us.

And they'll help us to keep walking throughout the rest of this week, the rest of this month, and our Christian lives. We pray all this in Jesus' name, amen.

[1 : 1 2] So let's read Hebrews chapter 4 verses 14 to 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.

But this isn't a start of a series or a popping into a middle of a series, it's just a one-off sermon really on some words and some verses that have been an enormous comfort to many Christians over the years and over the centuries.

And the question that they really address, the issue that they point to in our hearts is the question of how do we keep going? You might say that's one of the main themes, the main objectives in the book of Hebrews.

If you were to flick through, you'll see the author says things like strive to enter God's rest. Chapter 4 is all about not being sluggish, not failing where the Israelites did in the desert.

One of the most powerful images you'll know the writers of the Hebrews use is that of running a race and keep running. There's that famous verse in chapter 12, isn't it? Let us run the race with endurance, the race set before us, looking forward to Jesus as Jesus comes and goes before us, running the race ahead of us.

[2 : 5 1] And we'll hopefully have another time, another night to consider those verses. But the question that we come to in chapter 4 is how do we keep going when the Christian life gets tough?

Now the writer of the Hebrews is just reminding us of how the Israelites abysmally failed if you were to read chapters 3 and 4. So the question for us as Christians is how do we keep going?

How do we keep going when the Christian life gets tough? And I think this running imagery is helpful even just from the beginning that we have throughout Hebrews. Because I'm sure most of us have done some form of running, whether it's running after a ball playing football or running cross country races, that kind of thing.

But there are times when running is really painful, when you get a stitch in your side, when you don't have energy to keep going. There's a classic thing in a marathon when people hit 20 miles and it's called hitting the wall, when around about that time they just, well, they glycogen, the sugars stored in their body get depleted and they mentally and physically just crash.

How do you keep going? And you know, I don't know what your naturally like when it comes to physical exercise, but some people might just be, look, plug in their headphones, head down, grit your teeth and keep going.

[4 : 09] Other people might just be like, when it gets tough, I'm stopping. And if I have to keep going, I'm going to make it, I'm going to keep shouting about how hard it is.

We get also different responses, either grit your teeth or just this is impossible. And the thing is, we might feel like that when we're running, but we can also feel like that with the Christian life, I think.

When the going gets hard, what do we do? Do we grit our teeth and keep going, just try to suck in our strength? What do we just say? This is impossible.

And the Christian life can be hard. You'll know for many different reasons. You know, life in a fallen world can just be really tough as we face, as we face lots of different forms of suffering, whether it's people struggling with illness or just the fact that our bodies are in decay.

And we are slowly dying in that way. And we have to reckon with the ways our bodies fail us or looking after loved ones.

[5 : 15] Or there might be people who have a season of actually life is really difficult in the home, whether with children or parents or a spouse or really difficult in the workplace.

All kinds of things can make the Christian life really hard. And there's added things can add on to that because we're believers, because we not only have just the regular effects of a fallen world, but we also face opposition from being Christians.

We also have to keep fighting sin. Christian life can be really hard. So how do we keep going? I think Hebrews 4, the main thing we learn is that we can't do it on our own.

We can't just grit our teeth and go ahead and head into it. But neither is it impossible. Because the writers of the Hebrews wanted to remind us that at that point, when the Christian life seems impossible, we need to remember that we have a great high priest, a sympathetic high priest who has run the race before us.

And we're going to spend our time looking and trying to understand who Jesus is as that sympathetic high priest. After a few minutes this evening, we've got two headings.

[6 : 29] First Jesus is our sympathetic high priest, and Jesus gives help in time of need. Very functional, but that gives you a roadmap of where we're going.

Let me just read verse 15 again. If we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

The first point, Jesus is our sympathetic high priest. But I don't know whether you've ever asked this question. I've mulled on it off and on throughout the years. Why do we need a sympathetic high priest?

Never wondered that. In verse 14, we read that Jesus as the great high priest has passed through the heavens and now stands before God's throne.

He makes intercession for us. Jesus has completed his work on the cross. He has paid the price for sins. He now stands before God on our behalf.

[7 : 27] He has done everything that we need to be saved. Why do we need a sympathetic high priest as well? Have you ever wondered that? I want you to just rewind 3,000 years as it were, and imagine that you're an Israelite.

I think this helps us to grasp why we need a sympathetic high priest. Imagine you're an Israelite and you're coming to offer a sacrifice at the temple. Maybe it's a dove or a goat or even a bull, whatever it is.

But you go and you hand over your lamb to the priest and you explain what you've done. It's a sin offering. Imagine at that point the priest just turns to you and goes, you did what?

Again? How could you? You're just so stupid. You're so weak and ridiculous and they're just exasperated. Can you imagine if that was the priest's response?

You know, sympathy is important for a high priest because they deal with sinful people. You can just see that even if you look across, if you have your Bibles open to chapter 5, verse 2, we read about that we need that every earthly high priest is necessary that he act on behalf of men.

[8 : 40] It says he can deal gently with the ignorant and the wayward since he himself is beset by weakness. Now we need compassionate and a gentle high priest, one who understands that people are sinners, one who can relate to them and one who doesn't just pass them off and reject them in that way.

Well, Jesus is the most gentle and most compassionate person to ever walk the earth and that way he's the supremely sympathetic high priest, not because he is beset by weakness, but because he truly became one of us in every way in which that was possible.

So in Hebrews 2, chapter 2, verse 17, we read that Jesus had to be made by his brother, like his brothers, in every respect so that he could be a merciful and faithful high priest.

Jesus can understand us because he became like us. That's really important. Jesus doesn't have to just guess how we feel.

He's been there, he's felt it, he knows what it's like to walk this earth, he knows what it's like to feel this fallen creation and most importantly he was tempted as we are but without sin.

[10 : 03] I think Jesus has stood where humanity has stood but not fall. And I just think it's so striking that this comes straight after.

The writer has been comparing the Christian walk to the Israelites wondering the wilderness. What happened in the wilderness? I mean, it was just a series of events where again and again the Israelites just said, we give up, we want to go back to Egypt.

Egypt was, you know, they lasted about 500 meters and then called the race quits. And yet we were reading in Matthew 4 when Jesus was in the wilderness, he didn't call it quits, he withstood the temptation, he didn't fall up, he didn't like withstand the first temptation and then fail at the second.

The devil threw everything he could at him and Jesus didn't budge. He endured the fires of the wilderness as it were without sin.

And that without sin phrase is really important. It means that both in outcome Jesus didn't give in to temptation, so Jesus didn't sin but it also means that Jesus doesn't have a sinful nature.

[11 : 14] Jesus doesn't have any sinful temptations that come welling up inside us like we do. And you might think that well, if Jesus did no wrong and if he doesn't have a sinful nature, well how on earth can he really sympathize with me?

How on earth can he really understand what it's like to battle with sin? And C.S. Lewis gives a really helpful response to this question. It's a really legitimate question in his book, Mere Christianity.

I'm just going to read a little snippet because he says it far better than I could. He says, no man knows how bad he is until he has tried very hard to be good.

A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is.

After all, you find out the strength of the German army by fighting against it, not by giving in. You find out the strength of the wind by trying to walk against it, not lying down. I think that's very relevant for Lewis.

[12 : 12] A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is why bad people in one sense know very little about badness.

They have a sheltered life by always giving in. We never find out the strength of the evil impulse inside us unless we try to fight it. And Christ, because he was the only man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only man who knows to the full what temptation means.

He's the only complete realist. I find that really helpful. I find that imagery of standing against the wind really helpful. We so. We stand for some time, don't we?

We can stand for days, weeks even. But all of us buckle at some point. All of us are knocked over, flat down at some point. For Jesus has stood, withstood the full gale force wind of temptation for the 33 years that he lived on this earth and never once buckled.

We read that. We see how Jesus was tempted. In the Gospels, don't we? We see the anguish that he went through in Gethsemane as the weight of temptation approaching the cross built up and up and up.

[13 : 31] You know, Hebrews the writer later says, you have not yet resisted the point of shedding blood. Well, Jesus did, didn't he? To give it a temptation would have been to avoid the cross.

Peter told him to do it. The devil told him to do it. There were multiple opportunities where he could have. And yet he resisted to the point of shedding blood, even to his death on the cross.

If you've ever wondered why did Jesus didn't just appear on this earth at age 33? Well, I think part of the reason at least we're told in Hebrews is that Jesus was made perfect through what he suffered.

Jesus had to live on this earth and experience what it was like to live in a fallen world so that he could truly sympathize with us.

The Son of God wasn't imperfect in the incarnation. That's not what Hebrews means, but rather that in the incarnation he added to it himself the experience of suffering and temptation so that he could be a truly sympathetic high priest.

[14 : 37] Jesus is the most helpful kind of sympathizer we could have because he is a sinless sympathizer. If we were to take that marathon running example again, if you were running along and you were really flagging and really struggling at that 20 mile mark, now you might get tons of sympathy from the guy running next to you who's like, oh, don't worry, it's really hard at this bit.

I've done four marathons before and I've crashed and burnt out 21 miles. I haven't got further than that every time. You get loads of sympathy from that guy, but it wouldn't be very useful for sympathy.

The kind of helpful sympathy we get is from the girl who runs up besides you and says, I know how it feels, but push through, let's get to the end together.

Jesus doesn't put an arm around us as we plunge into hell together. He puts an arm around us to help us keep going to heaven. That's what a sinless sympathetic high priest is like.

That's why we need him. Jesus can sympathize with our weakness. That means he can relate to all our struggles.

[15 : 49] As you think through all the ways in which this fallen world batters you, Jesus can relate to that. He understands. You know, he knew betrayal by a close friend.

He faced loneliness as his disciples abandoned him. He was exhausted. He was wrongly accused. He was pressured to give up. You keep going. You can keep going as you look within the gospels.

Jesus understands. So when you find it hard when family members, friends turn their back on you because you're standing for Christ, Jesus understands that.

Jesus understands. I mean, you'll know the feeling of there will be some people you might talk to and they'll try to sympathize, but they just can't relate to it because they've never been through the same thing.

You know, it's a real relief when, for example, a parent is able to talk to someone about finding it so hard not to lose their temper with their kids and the person says, I understand, I've been there and they don't look at them like they're a crazy person.

[16 : 49] When we say, when we call out to God in our prayers, when we tell Jesus, we're finding it really hard in this Christian life. He doesn't look at us like we're crazy. He understands because he's been there.

He can truly sympathize. And so verse 16, the right to the Hebrews tells us that should give us confidence to draw near to him.

That gives us confidence to come to him in prayer. He's relatable. He's approachable. He's compassionate. He's gentle.

He knows us intimately. He knows us even better than the friend who even better than a twin who has lived the same life as us. Jesus knows our heart. He knows every facet of our being.

He knows the ways sin has scarred us. He knows the individual temptations. He knows the particular places and times that were weakest.

[17 : 46] And he understands. He understands and he knows even what's more. He knows every single battle that we lost, not just the ones we won. And he knows that because he bore on the cross that punishment for every sin that we have committed.

So let's take them to him. Let's take us into our sympathetic high priest in time of need. Second, Jesus gives help in time of need.

He not only understands and sympathizes, but so importantly he's able to help. Being a sympathetic high priest, you can say Jesus is perfectly qualified to help us.

Now after my sister ran a half marathon a few years ago, she was telling me that there's a group of runners called race angels. You can read about them online. And it says that race angels are a team of enthusiastic and hugely supportive runners who will be near the end of the race to accompany any runner who needs support and encouragement in the final mile or two.

All are experienced runners who know exactly how a runner is feeling. And one angel says in there, just a little quote bit, when I run alongside people who want a little support, I know how it feels and I can understand how a smiling face and a few kind words can help.

[19 : 08] I've been there myself in races. Well, Jesus has endured to the end. He can sympathize with our weakness. He understands how to keep going at that point.

But most importantly, he's not just a smiling friend, a smiling face and a few kind words, as helpful as that is. This can give real tangible help in time of need.

Let me just read verse 16 again for us. We read, let us then with confidence drawn into the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace in time of need.

That's what Jesus gives us. Mercy is probably referring to forgiveness when we sin. We can come to Jesus as our high priest. We can come to God through Christ.

And we can say, sorry God, I've messed up. I've failed. And God doesn't turn around and say, you did what? How could you? Not again.

[20 : 08] You've used too many times. No longer, no more. They're calling this quits. God doesn't turn our back on us. We don't face God's anger. And that's not because sin doesn't matter, but because the price has been paid.

God's righteous anger against sin was poured out every single drop on the cross. It's finished. And that's why we can come confidently to have mercy in time of need.

The prophet Isaiah says of Jesus, a bruised reed, he will not break. When we come in faith and ask Jesus for mercy, he doesn't break us.

He's compassionate. He binds up our wounds. And even if we come to mercy again and again and again, even if we've messed up in the same way again and again and again, we can find mercy in time of need.

We can also have confidence to ask for grace in time of need. We can tell God the pressures that we're facing. And he doesn't just say, oh, it can't be that bad.

[21 : 18] And really, you're just weak, you're just making a big thing about nothing. God doesn't say that. You know what Jesus is sympathetic.

And he gives us his grace, that free gift. And sometimes that might be a change in circumstances. Sometimes when we are crying out to God for help and temptation, he does take away that temptation.

He does take away this source of suffering. But he doesn't always. Often as we see across Hebrews, actually, he gives us strength to hold on and endure.

Whether that's temptation or mocking or persecution or suffering of any form, he strengthens us. I think there's a wonderful comfort as well that God will never leave us alone amidst temptation.

In John Corinthians 10, 13, we read that God is faithful and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability. But with the temptation, he will also provide a way of escape that you may be able to endure it.

[22 : 26] Now, from his abundance of grace, Christ can give us relief in time of need. And that might be taking away those concerns and desires and temptations. But relief can often also come in graciously showing us his fullness.

That his sufficiency. That in those times when we're so tempted to look away, we're tempted to duck below the parapet to avoid the hurt, actually, Jesus shows us that he is completely sufficient for all our needs.

That he is from that he is the source of life. That as we rest in him, that he will refresh us. Jesus has stood in our shoes, he understands, he knows.

So let's pray to him for relief. And when at times, when life can be really tough, we can be tempted to give up.

But at those times, let's ask Jesus to show himself to us, to help us to know him more, to help us to be captured by his gaze.

[23 : 36] And so help us in those times. Well, I began by asking you how we keep going when running gets hard. Do we look inside and say, this is impossible?

Do we shout? Do we look inside and just try to keep going? Or do we shout out loud and just say, this is impossible? What do we do when the Christian life gets hard?

And if you're an, I've got to keep going kind of person, well, you're right. We do have to keep going. But if we try to keep going under our own steam, if we try to keep pushing through the Christian life on our own, we're going to, it's just going to burn out and it's just going to become a bitter chore.

We're going to become drudgery and we're going to hate trying to obey God. And your great high priest share the load because he delights to draw alongside us and strengthen us in time of need.

If on the other hand you're listening and you feel honestly like just giving up because it's too hard. Well there's good realism there. It's true. Recognizing that this Christian life is hard, but it's not impossible.

[24 : 48] We have a high priest who listens to our cries for desperation. And what is impossible with man is possible with God. A sympathetic high priest like Christ loves to hear and promises to help.

Let me just read this quote by Charles Spurgeon. He has a great line on confidence. He says, I heavenly banker delights to cash his own notes. Never let the promise rust, draw the sword from the scabbard and use it with holy violence.

Think not that God will be troubled by your violence. Think not that God will be troubled by your reminding him of his promises. He loves to hear the outcry of the needy souls.

It is his delight to bestow favours. He is more ready to hear than you are to ask. It's never a pain. God is never like, God never groans or rolls here at his eyes when we come to him in prayer.

We can never pray too much, even in the midst of sin. I want to end though now by thinking about confidence because that is the aim of all these verses, isn't it?

[25 : 53] Verse 16, let us have confidence to draw near throne of grace. And the throne of grace is, well, that's the throne of the almighty God of heaven.

The God of heaven and earth. Then you might think, well, confidence, we're sinners. How on earth can we have confidence to draw near God's throne? I mean, think of it this way.

How confident do you think the high priest was back in the Old Testament when he went once a year into the most holy prayer? I mean, he was only allowed in once a year. He had to do an elaborate ritual of washing in the sacrifices.

Do you think if you'd interviewed him outside the tent and said, you know, how are you feeling about this? You think you'd have just said, yeah, confident? Probably not.

But Jesus has passed through the heavens into the real holy of holies. He is sat down at God's right hand. And so he says, draw near in confidence. I'm already standing there.

[26 : 52] I've already opened up the way. Come on in. And maybe we, maybe we, maybe we sometimes feel confident after we've prayed.

But here we're told that we can draw near the throne of grace and have confidence even before we ask for mercy. I just think that's amazing.

That just blows my mind that we can have complete confidence even in the midst of our sin before we come to Christ, knowing that he's already paid it all. He's already there interceding for us.

Isn't it wonderful that Christ, the one who he made himself flesh, he made himself like us. And even though he is God of God's light of lights, he still understands.

He still sympathizes with our weakness. He is the perfect high priest, all powerful and yet completely understanding and completely loving. And he bids us come near.

[27 : 55] So let's do that. Let's draw near. Now this week, whenever we need help in time of need. Let's pray. Thank you.