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Bridgeway Church

Hebrews #13

When Young Ravens Cry

Hebrews 4:14-16

Allow me to set the stage, so to speak, for what we read here in Hebrews 4:14-16, especially v. 16 on which we will focus most of our attention.

All of us are in need. All of us face situations with other people that stretch our wisdom to the limit. All of us encounter struggles and obstacles and roadblocks and landmines in life that we simply don't know how to navigate. All of us find ourselves in relational circumstances with other people that anger us and frustrate us and leave us feeling alone and wounded. All of us hurt physically. Some live with crippling doubt and others with paralyzing anxiety. A few might live in fear of the future while others struggle with regrets for the past.

And it really doesn't matter what your biggest problem is today. It doesn't matter whether it is similar to that of the person sitting next to you or if yours is altogether different and unique. It doesn't matter if it's of recent origin or if you've been saddled with it for years or if you ran smack dab into it only 30 minutes before entering this building. ***The only thing that matters is that you have great need and you know it and that you turn to the only person and place where genuine, life-changing help can be found.*** And that's what this passage of Scripture instructs us to do.

Two Truths / Two Exhortations

There are here in vv. 14-16 ***two exhortations***, each of which is grounded in or based upon a profound ***spiritual truth***. In both cases the basis or foundation or reason is stated first, then followed by the exhortation.

The **first** *spiritual truth* is found in v. 14a – “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God.” There it is. Did you notice that word “*since*”? We could as easily render it “because,” that is to say, “*because*” we have Jesus as our great high priest. That’s the reason, the basis, the foundation, and the grounds for the exhortation to follow.

Having just been told in vv. 12-13 that the Word of God pierces and divides and discerns our hearts and thoughts and intentions, having been told that we are all laid bare and exposed to the God to whom we must give an account, there is a strong likelihood that *some will recoil in fear*. The fear of judgment, the fear and apprehension of standing in the presence of an infinitely holy God, might paralyze some. So our author says, “No, no, don’t be afraid. You must remember that Jesus is your high priest. He is the Son of God and has passed through the heavens and has taken his seat at the right hand of God, there to intercede on your behalf. He’s your advocate. He’s your defense attorney. He’s your eternal friend.”

And what is the *exhortation* that is based on it? It’s there in v. 14b – “*let us hold fast our confession*.” Because Jesus is our great high priest we have all the more reason to hold firmly our confession of faith in him. We’ve already encountered this urgent appeal in 3:6 and 3:14 where he spoke of holding fast our confidence firm to the end. In other words, don’t despair in your faith; don’t give up hope; don’t abandon your confidence in Christ. Why? Because he is your great high priest!

The **second** *spiritual truth* is found in v. 15. Try to understand why our author says what he does about Jesus in this verse.

In speaking of Jesus as our “*high priest*” it almost sounds as if he’s detached from us, distant from us, indifferent toward the needs and worries and fears of ordinary people like you and me. But no, says our author, he’s not that kind of high priest. Let me tell you what he’s like and why you can trust him and why he can be counted on to understand your deepest struggles and pain. Having been tempted just like you and me, he can sympathize with us in our struggles. He knows what you’re feeling and what you’re facing in life.

Jesus, our high priest, is not like those priests of the Old Covenant such as Aaron who themselves were sinners and had to offer sacrifices for their own transgressions. No, Jesus was tempted just like us and can therefore sympathize with our weaknesses, but he never yielded to temptation.

We earlier encountered this same truth in Hebrews 2:18 – “For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.” But doesn’t the fact that he *didn’t* sin mean he *can’t* truly connect with me and identify with me and know deeply the struggles with sin that I face? No.

C.S. Lewis once heard someone voice the objection this way: "If Jesus never sinned, then he doesn't know what temptation is like. He lived a sheltered life and is out of touch with how strong temptation can be." Here is what Lewis wrote in response to that objection:

“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 . . . 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 lived a sheltered life by always giving in . . . 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—the only complete realist.”

There is an important difference between the **expressions** of sin and the **essence** of sin. ***Expressions change over time.*** Jesus wasn’t tempted to pull out a gun and shoot someone in cold blood. He wasn’t tempted to cheat on his income taxes. He wasn’t tempted to watch pornography on the Internet. He wasn’t tempted to exceed the limit on his credit card by purchasing things he really didn’t need. These particular expressions are unique to our century. ***But the essence of sin hasn’t changed.*** Jesus was tempted with unrighteous anger and greed and lust and hatred and every other sinful temptation that we face. And he faced them all without yielding and thus knows the battle each of us faces. He doesn’t roll his eyes at your pain or shrug his shoulders indifferently or in ignorance of what you are enduring.

That’s the *second spiritual truth* that serves as a reason, basis, or foundation for a crucial exhortation. And that *exhortation* is found in v. 16 – “Let us *then* with confidence draw near to the throne of grace.” The word “then” is actually a weak translation. The word means “*therefore.*” Again, *it is “because” we have a high priest who knows what we face and feel in our battle with temptation that we “therefore” must draw near to the throne of grace when we’re in a mess and need help.*

Today we are only going to look at the second of these two exhortations, the one we find in v. 16. We aren't ignoring the first. The fact is, most of Hebrews 5-10 is an explanation in great detail of what is said here in vv. 13-15. So we will actually come back again to it on several occasions in the weeks ahead. But for now, let's consider this remarkable invitation in v. 16.

Answering Four Crucial Questions

So let's look at this from the perspective of four questions.

(1) First of all, where are we to go? How many times have you cried out in desperation, "I just don't know where to turn! I don't know whom to trust! I don't have any place left to go! Where can I find the grace I need?" Here we are told: **"Draw near to the throne of grace."**

What comes to mind when you envision a *throne*? A king? A sovereign ruler? Yes, God is the great monarch of the universe, the eternal potentate, premier, and president of the cosmos all wrapped up in one. Knowing this ought to create expectancy in our hearts. As the hymn writer put it,

"Thou art coming to a king,
Large petitions with thee bring!"

The point is, we are not coming to a cosmic welfare agency for a meager handout or to the back door for scraps off someone's dinner plate. When we need grace for our souls we are coming to the *throne* of the King of kings! "In prayer," said Spurgeon, "we stand where angels bow with veiled faces; there, even there, the cherubim and seraphim adore, before that selfsame throne to which our prayers ascend" ("The Throne of Grace," in *Spurgeon's Expository Encyclopedia*, Vol. 12 [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996], p. 206).

Some people, on the other hand, are more *intimidated* than encouraged by the idea of a throne. The regal atmosphere, the power and dignity associated with one who sits on a throne, might put hesitation in more than a few hearts. That is, until we see that this is a throne *of grace*. Our author could have, but didn't, say the throne "of God" or the throne "of heaven." Make no mistake. It is certainly a throne to which we come. ***But it is grace that awaits us there. It is***

grace that sits enthroned. It is not a throne of law or of criticism or of judgment but of grace. This throne exists to dispense grace to those who seek it out. Its purposes are gracious. The utterances spoken there are gracious. The answers to prayer received there are all of grace.

This being a throne of *grace* means that ***our prayers will always be heard***. Though they often seem empty and frivolous to us, perhaps poorly constructed and poorly conceived, even badly spoken, God hears us. If this were a throne of justice or a throne of grammatical precision, we might have reason to worry, but it is a throne of *grace*! God doesn't care much for stately etiquette or courtly manners or palatial proprieties as earthly rulers do. The latter are quick to judge for one social *faux pas*. God only looks for humility and desperation in those who would petition him. So come. Ask him for grace to love him, to obey him, to enjoy him. Come falteringly, come failingly, but by all means come frequently.

What if the believer is unable to put words to his wants? Because this is a gracious throne ***God will read your desires without the words***. When my daughters were young and struggled to articulate their desires and needs, I didn't berate them or denounce their feeble efforts. I would help them any way I could, even by suggesting the very words they longed to utter. Will our heavenly Father do less for us? Spurgeon put it this way:

“He [God] will put the desires, and put the expression of those desires into your spirit by His grace; He will direct your desires to the things which you ought to seek for; He will teach you your wants, though as yet you know them not; He will suggest to you His promises that you may be able to plead them; He will, in fact, be Alpha and Omega to your prayer, just as He is to your salvation; for as salvation is from first to last of grace, so the sinner's approach to the throne of grace is of grace from first to last.”

Because it is a throne of grace, nothing is required of you but your need. Your ticket to this throne is not works but *desperation*. God doesn't want sacrifice or gifts or good intentions. He wants your *helplessness* in order that the sufficiency of his grace, at work on your behalf, might be magnified. This is a throne for the spiritually bankrupt to come and find the wealth of God's energizing presence. “This is not the throne of majesty which supports itself by the taxation of its subjects, but a throne which glorifies itself by streaming forth like a fountain with floods of good things” (Spurgeon, 210).

(2) And how often should we come? The verb translated “let us draw near” conveys the sense of ***an approach that never ends***. It is to be a daily, dare I say, hourly approach. We are constantly to

come near to God. There is *never* a time when it is inappropriate. There is *never* a time when he is not available to you. There is *never* a circumstance that makes approaching the throne of grace a bad idea.

This notion would have been entirely foreign to those steeped in the rituals of the old covenant Levitical system. Under the old covenant the only person allowed into God's presence was the high priest, and even in his case he could draw near to God *only on one day of the year*, the Day of Atonement. Although the high priest represented the people, they were still locked out of God's presence. Their approach was forbidden. But here we are invited, indeed commanded, to come always and at every point of need.

(3) *So, how should we approach God?* Our author answers this second question with one word: **confidence**. Confidence in what? Confidence in God, of course. The confidence that comes from knowing we have a great high priest who knows our thoughts, our hurts, our worst fears and our deepest desires.

But I want to suggest that this confidence is grounded not only in what God has done but in *who we are as a result of what God has done*. The psalmist said of God that "He gives to the beasts their food, and to the young ravens that cry" (Ps. 147:9). Could it be that this is what Jesus had in mind when he said, "Consider the ravens, they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!" (Luke 12:24). This is marvelous logic indeed.

The raven is but a bird, whose death means little. We, on the other hand, are immortal souls. No raven, as far as I know, will ever be redeemed or resurrected. No raven will ever be raptured. How, then, could God hear its cry, and he does, but turn a deaf ear to yours? No raven was ever formed in the image of God. If you heard the cry of a hungry raven simultaneous with the cry of an abandoned and starving infant, to which would you first give aid? I know, it's a silly question. But we are not better than God, are we? If we have the good sense to first attend the one who bears the divine image, will God do less?

Be it noted that Jesus refers to a *raven*; not a hawk or falcon or eagle or cardinal or robin or any such bird of beauty. It is to the lowly and seemingly useless raven that he appeals. If God would provide for the needs of so insignificant a bird, will he not happily and generously provide for yours? So, come to the throne of grace *with confidence*.

Let's stay with this analogy for a moment. Consider the cry of the raven. It speaks no words, articulates no phrases, formulates no arguments. Its cry is purely of instinct. The raven makes no appeal to grace and knows nothing of the high priest, Jesus. In fact, Jesus didn't die for a single raven, yet the Father graciously cares for their needs. How much more, then, shall he graciously care for yours.

Nowhere are ravens commanded to cry to God, yet we are repeatedly exhorted to do so. We have the divine warrant to come to this gracious throne. Ravens aren't told to come yet they never go away empty. You and I come as invited guests. How, then, shall we be denied by him who has issued the invitation?

The cry of the raven is at best that of an unthinking animal. Ours is the cry of the precious Holy Spirit within us (cf. Rom. 8:26ff.). When the ravens cry to God they do so alone, but we cry jointly with our heavenly intercessor, the Lord Jesus Christ (Heb. 7:25). If the mere chattering of a single bird prevails upon God, how much more shall the petitions of his blood-bought child who can clench a request with the biblical plea, "Father, do it for Jesus' sake!"

So, come to the throne of grace *with confidence*.

(4) What would you expect to find at a throne of grace? Grace, of course! But more than that, **mercy** too! It's one thing to find sympathy and understanding, but we need power and energy and sustaining strength in the inner man. The purpose of this prayer isn't primarily that we might feel better but that we might *get grace* that will help us in our moment of need.

When we come boldly and confidently to the throne of grace in prayer ***God doesn't just feel sorry for us***. His response isn't: "Oh, my, what a pathetic creature you are. You really got yourself into a mess this time, didn't you? Shame on you!"

No! No! God doesn't berate you when you come to him. The first thing out of his mouth isn't, "Well, where have you been? I guess you thought you could get along well enough without me until things got really bad. What do you expect from me now? Do you expect that after ignoring me all this time I'll just let by-gones be by-gones and give you whatever you ask?" If that were God's response our author couldn't possibly have described this as a throne of grace.

He doesn't make fun of you either. He doesn't mock you or ridicule you or openly compare you to other Christians who are a lot more consistent in their prayer lives.

So what is this "grace" that we get when we come to the throne of God? Well, it isn't the sort of grace that merely tells us what to do. This is the grace that *energizes and empowers* us to do what God has told us to do.

Grace doesn't merely point us in the direction of holiness, it infuses power that we might actually walk in that way. Grace is more than words of exhortation or cheers of encouragement. Grace is more than reasons to obey or arguments to persevere. ***Grace is power. Grace is energy. Grace is God at work in us to change us.*** Grace changes how we think, giving plausibility and sense to ideas once believed to be false. Grace changes how we feel, bringing joy in Jesus and revulsion for sin. Grace changes how we choose, creating new and deeper desires for what we once found unappealing. Grace changes how we act, equipping and energizing the soul to do what we have failed to do so many times before.

If we are to have hope for holiness, we must have the heart-changing, mind-changing, will-changing work of divine grace that is sovereignly bestowed when heart-weak, mind-weak, will-weak people ask for it from the only place it may be found: the throne of grace.

If I may, for a moment, direct your attention to Philippians 2:12-13, I think you'll see what I mean. There Paul speaks of "God who works in you, both *to will* and *to work* for his good pleasure" (2:13). If we are to resist temptation, if we are to say No to sin, walk in sexual purity and integrity of heart, *God* must be *at work* in us. When Paul says that God works in us so that we might "will" what is right, he has in mind a volitional resolve on our part. God energizes our minds and hearts to want to work his will. This is grace! This is the Holy Spirit creating in us a desire and a love and an inclination to happily embrace whatever pleases the Father (cf. Ps. 119:36).

When Paul says that God works in us so that we might "work" what is right, he again has in mind divine grace that brings to effectual fruition the behavioral end toward which our will is inclined. In other words, the continuous and sustained working *out* on the part of the Christian is the *gracious product* of the continuous and sustained working *in* on the part of God. We not only *desire*, we also *do*, by virtue of the dynamic, antecedent activity of *grace* in our souls.

This is the *grace* that constitutes the *help* that God so freely supplies in response to the humble prayer of those who rely on him for holiness. God *helps* by imparting to our souls a new taste for spiritual things that we might relish and savor the sweetness of Christ above all rival flavors. He *helps* by infusing our hearts with a new disposition, a fresh way of thinking, a passion for the joy of enjoying him. This *help* is *grace*! Without it we are hopelessly consigned to living out the impulses of the flesh that will invariably lead us into the deceitfulness of sin (cf. Heb. 3:12).

If we are to find in Jesus the fairest of ten thousand, if we are to revel in the joy he so generously supplies, our hearts must be fed with grace. If we are to see in him surpassing excellency and for that reason say No to the passing pleasures of sin, our hearts must be fed with grace. If we are to be fed with grace, we must come boldly to the throne on which it is seated, poised and ready to help us in our time of need, and we must ask.

And if you and I are to find answers to our questions and strength to face the rest of today and patience to endure what comes next week and power to overcome Satan's seductive ploys and hope to keep us on the right track until Jesus comes back, we must come to the throne of grace. ***Don't bring with you anything other than your need of Christ.*** Don't come with promises and reminders of past triumphs. Don't come with money or some other form of bribery. Don't come with apologies or regrets. Come empty and needy with an open hand and open heart and let God fill you with grace and mercy to help you in your hour of need.