

## The Promises of Prayer

12/31/17

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Have you ever stopped to realize that some of the 'regular, everyday things' we have, are truly amazing? For example, the simple phone, that is not that simple any longer. The technology we have at our fingertips is truly amazing. You can pick up your phone and be pretty **confident** that your call will be answered and you can talk with anyone virtually around the world. When you think that your actual voice is transmitted across states, even continents and oceans to someone else, and whoever answers your call can hear your voice, that is amazing technology!

But there are times when we can **lose some confidence** in our phones. Why? Because there are still places we can go where our call either does not go through, or is dropped - in the mountains, in a tunnel or underpass, or when you are in the middle of nowhere (like on the way to San Diego). When we lose a call in the middle of a conversation, it is so frustrating! When you find yourself just talking, and no one is on the other end, but you don't realize it for a while - don't you feel like the guy in the old Verizon commercial and just asking every few moments of silence - **'Can you hear me now?'**

My question for us this morning - Is the experience of a **dropped call an illustration about how we feel about prayer?** Is prayer more like making a call wondering if God is really listening on the other end? It is hard to have confidence in our prayers, when we don't have a voice responding to us. We already know that prayer is one-way conversation, by God's design, and we know as Christians that prayer is important, even commanded. But aren't we tempted to be asking when we find ourselves praying the same prayer for weeks without seeing an answer - **God, can you hear me now?** Or when the very thing you were praying against happens - **God, can you hear me now?** Or when our prayer feels weak, empty, and powerless - **God, can you hear me now?**

This morning, I want us to look into the book of Hebrews, and see why we can pray **confidently**, knowing, without a doubt, with settled confidence that God is listening. This passage in Hebrews does not even mention the word 'prayer' but it talks about the experience of prayer. It speaks of a **confidence** that every Christian can have every time they pray. A settled **confidence** that God is truly 'still on the line', and He will never allow the 'call, or prayer, to be dropped'. Basically, we will see that God in this passage is giving us an eternal answer of **'Yes' ... to the question - 'God, can you hear me now?'**

Hebrews 4 :14-16 will be our text today, and as we look at it together, we will see that...

- God is the one who **invites us to pray**
- God is the one who **sympathizes with us when we pray**
- God is the one who **promises to answer us when we pray**

Read the passage:

14 *Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.* 15 *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.* 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.*

## Prayer

Big idea - **Come to God with confidence, that He hears, and answers, your prayer**

### Passage Background – ‘*Since then...*’

- (14) *Since then we have a great high priest, who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.*

The book of Hebrews is **written primarily to Jewish Christians**, and is explaining to them how superior Christ, and Christianity is to the old Mosaic way of life with its sacrifices and rituals. He was showing them in the first 3 chapters that Christ is greater than any angel, Moses, every high priest, and salvation comes only through Jesus. He is encouraging them to hold on by faith to the true rest found in Christ and to encourage others in the church to persevere.

As Jewish Christians, they were tempted to **fall back into the religion of Judaism**, where they had spent their lives. Because in Judaism there was far less persecution. They were discouraged, life was truly hard, they were experiencing genuine persecution and hardship as we see later in the book:

- Hebrews 10:32-35 **32** *But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, 33 sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. 34* *For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. 35* *Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.*

They were in **danger of losing their confidence**. So, here in chapter 4, the Hebrew writer is encouraging them to persevere by helping them to see the amazing privilege and power of embracing a biblical perspective on prayer.

### Explain the Passage:

This passage about prayer **begins with a description of Jesus** that addresses the Jewish Christians, by pulling an example from their lives as Jews. He refers to Jesus as a high priest, a familiar part of their old religious system. Hebrews is the only book in the Bible that refers to Jesus in this way, and the author does this for them to see how much greater Jesus is in every

way to their old religious life. He wants their confidence in Jesus to be secure... to motivate them to come to God in confident prayer!

- (14) *Since then we have a great high priest, who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.*

This **description of Jesus as a high priest** was relatable for them, but less for us, so let's look at this description in more detail:

- The **high priest was the appointed representative** of the people, who would annually come into the very presence of God for the people. The people were too unholy to come into the presence of God, so the priest would be their substitute, their mediator.
- The comparison was **to see that Jesus was the great high priest**, who did not just annually come temporarily into God's presence, but who came to us from being in the very presence of God. *'He passed through the heavens, referring to his incarnation'*. He truly is the 'great high priest. He accomplished so much more than the high priests they knew. Why return to them?
- Also, Jesus as our high priest did not just perform the sacrifices for the people, but He became the sacrificial lamb. **He was the perfect and complete sacrifice** for our sins, completely, eternally effective, never to be repeated.
- **In Jesus, forgiveness was not just secured once a year**, as performed by the high priest on the annual day of atonement, but complete, unlimited forgiveness secured at the cross for all time. Jesus is the 'great' high priest.
- Then the author adds that **he passed through the heavens** - In this incarnation, He passed through the heavens to be born and to live a sinless life, and to die on the Cross for our sins, and then to rise again on the third day in triumph over sin and death. Later he ascended back to heaven to sit at the right hand of God. *He passed through the heavens*, not only referring to his incarnation but also his resurrection and ascension. This great high priest is the master over all creation, with complete dominion over sin and death.

Then he adds the title of this great high priest – the **Son of God**

He is the very **Son of God**. What statement could add greater reason for **confidence**? Placing your faith in the person and work of Jesus. *Hold fast to the confession* of your faith!! He is the true Messiah! Have **confidence!!** Jesus is who he says he is, and has done all he claimed.

**They were encouraged (even commanded) to "hold fast"** and not let go of the truth about Christ and his message (the gospel). They were tempted, as we are at times, to let go of these

truths. Hold fast to the confession that Jesus is the **Son of God**. The Hebrew author then adds to the description of Jesus, going far beyond any high priest and his work for them in **verse 15**.

- *15 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.*

The author of Hebrews uses a **double negative** to help bring emphasis the positive point he is making about Jesus. ...*we do not have a high priest who is unable...* In other words, he is completely able sympathize with us.

He became one who can understand and even *sympathize with our weaknesses*. He can understand us through HIS own human experience. **Nothing in human experience is foreign to him, for he himself has endured it**. He has been tested, tempted and tried like us, and beyond us, because his temptation never resulted in sin. He can now *sympathize with you* and understands you in each and every life challenge you face.

The verb used here, **translated sympathize, means to 'feel with'** and was often used to describe a bond similar to a mother's feeling for her children, or one brother's feeling for the other. An intimacy and understanding is being communicated here to the relationship Jesus has with believers...the feeling of one who enters into the suffering and makes it his own.

He can sympathize with their weaknesses. What **historical high priest was there that could do that for them?** There is a very good chance they did not even know their individual names. One high Priest would represent the entire nation of Israel while in office, easily millions of Jews, so how would he even know them, much less be able to sympathize with what was going on in their lives. Jesus does, he knows their issues, challenges, even their names - and he knows yours, and he understands you, your needs, your wants, your weaknesses in a perfect way as well.

The author is saying that **Jesus, the Son of God, has walked in their shoes**, and ours, and knows what it is like to be tempted in every conceivable way. Every temptation we have experienced, so has he. But he has done so perfectly, never yielding to those temptations, never ever sinning, even under the most trying of circumstances. He experienced even more than we can, because he never gave into temptation. Because of that, he understands!

Then in **verse 16** we hear the sweet, gentle, call - to come - to draw near to God, to come to Him in prayer.

- *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.*

What a sweet encouragement, to come to Him to His throne. I have never been to England or invited to Buckingham palace to see the throne room. **Queen Elizabeth** and I are not exactly pen pals - But this one, the greatest throne, in the greatest throne room of all, the throne of the

master of the universe, the creator of the world. This is where we are called to draw near. We are asked to come, and the entry way is through prayer.

Also note what we are asked to come near to – ***the throne of grace***. The throne of grace is the place that grace is given to his people.

The very presence of God, his very throne. This is God’s encouragement for us to come to Him. But also notice how his throne is described. It is a throne of grace. It is not a throne of judgement, or a throne of discipline, or a throne of condemnation, it is a throne of grace.

“A throne a grace means that when you come your sins are covered by the blood of Christ, and your faults are looked upon with compassion. Your stumbling prayers are not criticized, but are received with kindness.” Richard Phillips

Because it is a throne of grace, God is ready to grant our requests. Grace is a wonderful description of the posture of God towards us, because of what Jesus has done for us. When we come in prayer, we come to a throne of grace, unconditional love, and unconditional acceptance. We are invited to come to the throne of grace to receive from our great God:

This should help us to battle our thoughts, when we see we are coming in prayer to a throne of grace. We can “think” when we begin to pray...

- God, I don’t deserve to be here, I have done things I know to be wrong – I expect judgement - no...mercy, it is a throne of grace
- God, I don’t pray except when I have a problem, I am ashamed to be here – I deserve judgement – no mercy, it is a throne of grace
- God, I have not prayed in months, I don’t’ belong here – I expect and deserve punishment - no Mercy, it is a throne of grace.

## **Application**

When we look at this passage, how should it motivate us to pray with confidence that God hears us? I believe it should motivate us in at least these three ways – Three things that show us why we can come with confidence, knowing **‘He can hear us now’**:

### **1. We can pray confidently, because God invites us.**

*16 Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace...* Hear the invitation from the Hebrew author? More importantly hear the invitation from God himself, the true author of scripture?

Let us draw near with a settled confidence, this confidence secured by Jesus, because we are invited, personally, to come to Him. Note that the author of **Hebrews includes himself in this invitation**, the author includes himself, and includes you in this 'us'. This indicates that no one, even biblical writers, can successfully live this Christian life without prayer being an active part of it.

Any invitation is an indication that **someone wants you to come**. This invitation is real, and it is personal, and it is sincere. This is not only an invitation to the Jewish audience, but to every believer in Christ.

**This invitation is not like an evite...** it is not one that is easily sent on-line with the stroke of an enter key. When you see this in your in-box, you wonder, why am I being included? Is this just coming to me because it is going to everyone in my office, or my class? Or in my case, are they inviting me because they really want Charlotte to be there, they feel they have to include me? Do they really want me to come?

**God's invitation is not like that.** God's invitation is specific to you and is intentional. God's invitation is personal. God's invitation is directed to you purposefully. God's invitation is never given because he should, or to be politically correct. God's invitation to come to him in prayer is genuine.

In light of that, why would we not respond to his personal invitation to come to him in prayer? Also, this invitation is not tied to a date or an event. **His invitation will never expire.** It is open ended. It is an invitation that is basically defined by our need to come to Him, not by his schedule. It is communicating that God has an open calendar for you, there is no procedure, no secretary to go through, and to get an audience, you simply come – responding to HIS invitation.

## 2. We can pray confidently because God understands us.

**God understands us because he became us.** A savior who has experienced everything that we have, and will, ever experience, and he understands us in our deepest moments of weakness. When we cry out to him we can know he understands us in our deepest need.

*15 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.*

When you have something that needs attention, **you look for someone who will understand** when you explain it to them. If it is a **mechanical problem** with your car, you want a mechanic who can relate to your problem as you explain it to them. Or if you have **physical pain** you need addressed, you look for a doctor that will listen, and

has the necessary experience and knowledge to properly understand and diagnose your problem.

Every area of our life is this way. This is the way God made us, we desire to be understood when we have need. God understands us in this way, and has articulated in this passage that He does understand us. **His understanding goes far beyond anyone else**, in every possible area of life.

**We can think it is the opposite.** It is easier to feel that someone understands us, when we see their facial expressions, hear their voice of compassion, or feel their gentle touch.

However, there is not a friend, or any earthly relationship, like the one we have with Jesus, that can know, identify, and understand, the way Jesus says here, that he can, and will.

- **When we feel the most distance from God**, it is a feeling and not a reality. We see in Matthew 20:28 God says 'I am with you always, even to the end of the age.' As his son or daughter, we are never separated from God, but we can feel that way when life trials are pressing in on us. At those times, remember, Jesus, He felt distant from God, because he was distant from God. He was even forsaken on the cross, He completely understands how we feel...
- **When we feel so alone in our difficult life situations.** When we feel alone, it can lead to discouragement, even depression. Feeling alone can affect any of us – the isolation of being a single parent, or daily life lived with pain, or continued unemployment or underemployment leading to financial difficulties, you are praying but your situation is not changing and we pray the same request for years. When we are tempted to – remember **He was alone, all left him as He went to the Cross**, He understands the temptations of isolation, discouragement, depression. Remember He resisted all temptations, understands your every weakness. He understands.

That does not mean that we do not do what elsewhere in scripture it encourages us to: Share one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. Galatians 6:2

But do we sometimes allow that conversation, that meeting, that sharing time to be a substitute for prayer, thinking that others can understand better and more completely than Jesus? They can give us compassion, they can give us wise counsel, they can direct us to the Word, but Grace is found only one place – the throne of God.

Let go to other brothers and sisters in Christ for help and prayer, **but let us first go to Jesus**. Let us not expect a close Christian friend to understand more fully than the Son

of God, who can sympathize with us more deeply and understand more completely than any other.

Let confident prayer be our first step, talking to our greatest friend, before we make that call to that close friend.

### 3. We can pray confidently because God will answer us.

- *16 Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

We can draw near because **God promises to answer us** when we come to him in prayer .... *that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

**There is a promise about prayer that we need to see in this passage.** When we come to God in prayer, responding to HIS invitation mind you, we leave his presence, His throne room, with something. Something more precious than gold. We leave with mercy and grace. When we believe that God responds by giving us mercy and grace every time we come to him in confident prayer, it will make prayer something we find time to do.

All too easily **we can look at prayer a Christian requirement**, a measurement for our spiritual report card, an item on our to do list that does not receive enough checkmarks. But when we see prayer as the Hebrew author is describing it to us, we see something that is much more beneficial to us than we can imagine.

Every time we come in prayer, **we receive what we need.** Possibly not what we have asked for, but what we need. We are guaranteed to receive mercy and grace when we come in prayer. Our confidence in coming is based on holding fast to the truth of who Jesus is and what he has done.

**What do we need, when we pray? Mercy.** Mercy for what we have done wrong, mercy for what we have missed and can't change, mercy for our failures and sin. Basically, we receive mercy for all our past and present sins that can so easily keep us from responding to God's invitation and come in prayer.

- *that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

But, you may ask, how sure is this promise for me? It does say...*that we **may** receive mercy?* It sounds like it is a possibility that we may or may not receive mercy, **a 50/50 proposition.** It can leave us with the impression receiving mercy maybe based on how I ask for it. However, this phrase can be translated as '*to receive*', *to take hold of*, *to*



*acquire*, helping us to see that when we come in prayer we always receive mercy from God. What an amazing truth. Mercy is always welcome, and it is:

- Mercy is compassion from one with means to one in need
- Mercy is a focus on the assurance that past transgressions have been dealt with.
- Mercy is extending unmerited love
- Mercy is reminding us of unmerited forgiveness

*...and find grace to help in time of need.*

In addition to mercy, we are told that at the throne of grace, we will *find grace to help in our time of need*. - **Or more literally, 'discover grace for a well-timed help.'** Who would not want this result to their prayer as they come to the throne of grace – to discover 'grace to help' exactly when we need it.

We are promised in 2 Corinthians 12:9,

*'My grace is sufficient for you, my power is perfected in weakness.'* 2 Corinthians 12:9

**Where do we get that sufficient grace?** We get it at the throne of grace. When is it available to us? *In our time of need*. It is as if the Lord is providing a treasure chest full of grace, available to us whenever we need, we just need to come to God in confident prayer, to the throne of Grace.

What is grace?

- Grace is power to do what we can't do, but God can do
- Grace implies help to us
- Grace is answering prayer

**We need grace.** Grace to help us with our problems, needs, with life in general. We are praying because we have a time of need. We need help. God again promises prayer has a result - mercy and grace to help in our time of need.

You may be thinking now, that **the 'prayer phone line' must be dropping when you pray**, because you are not seeing any grace coming through in the areas you are praying about.

- **Remember what the power of grace brings** – it is power **to live for Christ** in the midst of the real life and pressures we have. It would be great if they would change, or go away, but greater joy, is being able to trust God and live for him when the answer is yet to come. Why? Because that points to Jesus and not to

us. That is great grace, and that is what God has for everyone, every time we pray.

- **When we don't see an answer**, it is not because God has stopped listening, or dropped the call, it is because **the answer is in process**, and in the meantime, he gives you grace to have the peace and joy of God in the midst of it. **Grace is evidence that 'He can hear you now'**.

## Conclusion

This passage can help us to have a **settled confidence** that God is hearing and answering our prayers.

A settled confidence – what does really that mean? I believe this term describes the goal of the author in our section of Scripture today. Let me explain with this example:

This summer, when President Trump pulled America out of the **Paris Climate Accords** that were supporting the global climate change initiatives, there was much discussion from both sides of the position (and my purpose in using this illustration is not to defend a position, but to focus on the argument used.)

The proponents of Climate Change, referred to their scientific evidence as a **'settled science'**. In other words, any debate on the existence of climate change, from their position, was fruitless because it is already settled, it is no longer to be debated. Therefore, for them, any conversation about climate change must begin at that point acknowledging that the debate is already settled. The argument is brilliant, because it shuts down any debate, because, in their view, it is settled.

In our passage today, I believe our author made the argument for us that we can all have a **'settled confidence'** in the truth that God is always hearing and answering our prayers. Therefore, when the enemy comes into our thoughts to breed doubt and debate, to say –

- God is not listening to you, why should he?
- You don't deserve God to answer you, remember the sinner you are!
- You are not praying enough, work harder to earn his attention first!

We can say with a settled confidence, you are wrong, this debate is over, because of Jesus and what He has done for me, I have a settled confidence he will always hear me – **He can hear me right now!**

Prayer is not optional for the Christian, it is a command. However, as we respond to this command, we are the beneficiaries. But **rather than command** the readers to pray, **these verses invite** the reader to pray by grasping hold of truth about Christ. Then in light of all the

author says about Jesus - who Jesus is, and all that Jesus has done, we are then invited to come to him in prayer. Because of the person and work of Jesus Christ we can know with confidence that God is always saying, inaudibly but assuredly to our prayer, - **'I can hear you know.'**

**As we begin a new year tomorrow**, it is the time for New Year resolutions. When we think of prayer, I would simply encourage all of us to see 2018 a year that we all respond more often to the invitation of God to pray. Whatever our frequency of prayer, let's commit that to grow. As we remember...

- God is the one who invites us to pray
- God is the one who understands us when we pray
- God is the one who promises to answer when we pray

More prayer results in more mercy and more grace for you and me.

**Come to God with a settled confidence, that He hears and answers your prayer**

Talk to the unbelievers...

**Prayer to close**

Benediction:

*14 Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15 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. 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*

**Dismiss**