

Finding Grace

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[0 : 0 0] Hebrews chapter 4 verse 15, it's page 1203. So Hebrews chapter 4 verse 15 says this, we don't have a high priest who's unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way just as we are, yet was without sin.

Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. As I mentioned earlier, we've been working through a series of sermons in the church here, just looking at the idea of grace in the Bible. And the idea of grace in the Bible is basically the idea of God's kindness given to us even when we don't deserve it. And the Bible will say, when we're realistic about ourselves and how we've lived our lives and how we've treated God, then we never deserve his kindness. So everything God gives us is given in grace, and a love that's shown to us, though we don't deserve it. And here, in verse 16 of Hebrews 4, it talks about finding grace in the time of need. And what he means by that is finding a strength, a courage and a help from God in our times of need. So that's kind of where we're going.

My football team is going through a time of need. Wraith Rovers are currently the only joint bottom of the Scottish First Division. And that's the opposite of where they were last season, the Finnish nearer the top of the league last season. But this season, they're on a downward spiral. And the causes of this are easily identified, lack of money and losing some of their best players over the summer break.

And so we can see the reason for their struggling. We can see a solution if the chairman's willing to put in money to the club and get them some decent players. But in the meantime, the coach, John McGlynn and the players and the fans, they just have to live with the situation, even though it's far from ideal. No goals scored for 394 minutes, one win in 12 games. Players whose confidence is shattered, supporters who are getting annoyed. And everybody just has to put up with it and live with the situation. They can see the causes, they can see a solution, but in the meantime, they just have to live with the pain. And living with pain, living with sufferings, a problem for everyone. And that includes Christians. So as Christians, if you're not a Christian, I want to say we as Christians don't claim exemption from suffering and God doesn't give us exemption from suffering. We suffer just as much as everyone else. And that causes a problem for all of us,

Christian or not, because if we believe in a God who's loving, and if we believe in a God who's powerful, then if he loves us and he's all powerful, why does he let us suffer so much? Why doesn't he just cancel out the suffering and take it away and make life easier? And the Bible is certain things to say to that. So as with Wraith Throvers, we can trace the root of the problem, and the Bible traces the roots of suffering right back to the beginning of the human race, to Adam and Eve, the book of Genesis, human origins, and says suffering is in our world, because as human beings we've chosen to reject God, to rebel against God, and to poison our relationship with God in our prideful independence. So the Bible traces the roots of suffering away back there. And the other thing that the Bible does, it points to the end of suffering, it sees a solution, and the solution is found through Jesus, who came into our world to deal with the problems we've created through our selfishness, greed, rebellion against God.

[5 : 1 1] And what the Bible kind of asks us, it says, you know, what kind of world would you really like to live in? What's your ideal world? So, you know, there are lots of things about our current lives, and the world as it is today, we would like to change. So you might not be a Christian, you might be a Christian, think about that, oh, you know, what would you like to change about the world you're living in? What kind of world would you like to live in? And when you ask people what kind of world would you like to live in, then they generally give very similar answers.

And the kind of answers that people give is that they would like to live in a world of peace, a world where there are no natural disasters, a world where there's no loneliness, a world where there's no

crime, a world without fear, a world as C.S. Lewis put it, where all our sadnesses are undone, a world that is loving and peaceful. And that's the world that the Bible promises us through Jesus. God says the world will be like that one day. It's called the new creation by the Bible. And that world will come about through Jesus when he returns to judge the world.

But God does say to us, it's not here yet, it's still to come. There is a world that is promised in the Bible of no more tears, no more death, and no more pain. But the present circumstances of life can often be really difficult. And so the Bible gives us a bit of a framework to understand suffering, its causes, and how suffering will one day come to an end. And that's something that's really important to us as Christians, and we believe that people who don't believe in God, people who have a very materialistic view of the world, that it's much harder for you to explain suffering and live with meaning and hope in the face of suffering. The Bible gives us a framework and hope to understand all that. But the other thing that the Bible is really interested in is not just sort of why they're suffering or will suffering come to an end one day. But the Bible's actually, a lot of the Bible is very interested in how we experience suffering on a day-to-day basis. So in other words, let's not just think about suffering in an abstract way, but let's think about suffering in a real personal way. How do we experience suffering, and how do we deal with the suffering that we experience? How do we cope with the crisis of living with intolerable suffering on a day-to-day basis? Where do we go? How do we cope when we feel forgotten and alone? I've been reading a

Psalm this week quite a lot. So in other words, I'm sort of repeatedly reading the same Psalm, Psalm 31. Where David, who wrote the Psalm, King David of Israel says, Be merciful to me, O Lord, for I am in distress. My eyes grow weak with sorrow, my soul and my body with grief, my life is consumed by anguish and my years by groaning. My strength fails because of my affliction, my bones grow weak.

Because of all my enemies, I'm the contempt of my neighbour. I'm forgotten by everyone as though I were dead. I've become like broken pottery. So, you know, Israel to David, forgottenness, aloneness, feeling crushed without hope, that's real to him. It's what his life is like at that time. I spoke into two people this week. Neither of them are from this congregation, in case you start trying to calculate who I'm talking about. But two people I spoke to, one was on the phone, one I met them at a conference. And both of them are going through extremely difficult personal circumstances. And both of them said they feel like God is not there. And they feel like God has completely forgotten them. One is a guy called Stuart, who is starting up a new church in a place called Hinckley in Leicestershire. And Stuart's wife, Rachel, has had meningitis 12 times. And she's had repeated bouts of meningitis because there's a problem at the top of her spine where it goes into her brain. And spinal fluid leads into her brain.

[10:17] So about two months ago, Rachel was taking for surgery to try and fix this problem once and for all. They were going to do something to her skull to stop the spinal fluid looking through.

So they do the operation and it goes badly wrong. Two days later, they have to operate on her again. This time it seems to go better. They send her home and then she gets extremely ill, taken back into hospital for a third operation. And Stuart said, you know, there have been so many times in the last few weeks where I thought I was sitting beside Rachel's deathbed. And he said, I never once felt like God was there for me. I feel completely alone. This is a Christian minister.

So being a Christian doesn't mean that suffering is easier. He has found, as Stuart has found, no comfort in his faith. And when we really suffer, we think, you know, maybe there is no God after all. And if there is a God, he's mean. He's a bully. He's cruel. Why is he putting me through such terrible heart-breaking experiences? And that's what this letter, this book, is all about.

How can we find grace in those circumstances? How can we find God's help when we feel that God doesn't want to help? Hebrews is a book written to people feeling forgotten and abandoned by God. And because they feel forgotten and abandoned by God, they want to abandon God and forget Him. They want to walk away from their faith and think it was a waste of time and a big mistake.

[12:20] So I'm just going to work through this just verse a little bit just to try and see what kind of advice they're being given and to see if we can take some of that advice for ourselves.

Maybe we're going through something similar, but maybe we're not. But you will come across people going through similar circumstances. And one of the problems, of course, is that when we find people who are really struggling, often we give them trite advice and shallow reassurance. And that's what the book of Hebrews is trying to avoid. So the time of need is what we're talking about. That's the end of verse 16. We need to find grace. Why do we need to find grace? Because

we're in a time of need. We're in a time of crisis. We're in a time of suffering and loss and grief and pain. And that means the Bible is saying to you, don't be surprised when these things happen to you. God wants you to know in advance that even as a Christian, you're going to find situations in life and go through experiences in life where you feel abandoned, forgotten and broken. It might be the death of a child. It might be cancer in your husband or wife. It might be all kinds of horrible, terrible personal situations. And what I want to say to you, what the writer in Hebrews is trying to say is, God never promised it would be any different from that. God never said it would be easy. Jesus asked Christians to pick up a cross and follow Him. Jesus calls us to die to ourselves and to deny ourselves. And all of those things are painful scenarios. The call of the Christian life is a call to suffering, to service, to submission and to sacrifice. That's the way it was for Jesus.

And that's the way Jesus says it will be for us. And so we're not given a magic wand by God or a good fairy who waves all our troubles away. Christians experience loneliness and unemployment and broken relationships and betrayal and illness and bereavement and tragedy and temptation.

[15:09] For these people in the book of Hebrews, that came in the form of religious persecution. And as the church, we cannot make the mistake of saying, if only you trust Jesus, if only you have faith, if only you have enough faith, then your persecution will be over or your cancer will be healed or your problems with money will disappear. Because sometimes God asks us to endure with our problems, to persevere with our problems, to live with them and He doesn't take them away.

And so this is advice about what happens when God doesn't heal our cancer, when God doesn't wave the magic wand and make our problems disappear. And the advice we're told is go to the throne of grace and find grace to help us in our time of need. So God doesn't offer magic. God doesn't just wave the problems away. And instead of offering magic, He offers grace. He offers strength. He offers help. He offers endurance.

And so when you're going to God to look for grace, those are the things you're looking to receive and looking to get. And sometimes we're just looking for the strength to take the next few steps in life. I remember I was hill walking once and halfway through the walk, I slipped in a boulder and I ripped a quad muscle and I still had about another 11 or 12 miles to walk. So it was pretty painful and I couldn't lift my right leg so my steps were sort of one step like this and then I dragged my foot and this had to go on for the next 11 miles and I was pretty sore. So what did I do? Well all I did was concentrate on the next two or three steps because if I thought about I have to do 11 miles of this and there's nobody really to help me then it was just I wanted to sit down and cry and bathe in my own self pity. So just the next couple of steps and next couple of steps and sometimes that's the way it is in the Christian life.

It's just about taking the next few steps. And so we go to the throne of grace to get grace to take the next few steps. To find the power not to transcend suffering not to avoid suffering but to endure suffering. To take hold of God's grace to take possession of it.

[18:28] To find the resources that we need to submit to God's will in times of pain. To serve others in our distress. To deny ourselves to make sacrifices and to bear with things.

So what's the throne of grace? Because that's the advice here isn't it? Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. So what's the throne of grace? Well this verse is about prayer. It's about saying who can help me in this crisis? There is only one person, God. He can give me the sustaining power. And so this is about asking God. The throne of grace was a kind of Hebrew phrase or expression for the place where God lives.

So we're encouraged to go to God in prayer and ask for grace. Now some of you are new to this. You haven't been Christians long or some of you aren't Christians at all. So what does it look like? How do you go about asking God for something? What kind of picture should we have in our heads at this point? You know how do you speak to God? Is it like going to see the head teacher with your knees knocking? I went to James Gillespie High School for a few years and I had a stremache with a teacher one day, probably the best way of putting it. And so I got hauled up to to the head teacher. And the only thing that was bothering me was that they were putting in my Uckus or Ucus references at that time. So I didn't want to fall out with the school too badly.

So I was dreading this confrontation, this interview, you know, thinking how am I going to say how do I speak to this person? How am I going to get out of this scrape? How am I going to get them to look favourably on me and show me a little bit of mercy in these circumstances?

[20 : 49] So that's what it's like when you go to God. You go sort of feeling dread and mumbling nervously and wondering how you can persuade God to treat you in a merciful and helpful and kind way.

What do you say? How do you speak? What language should we use? Well, it's a throne of grace. I want to say that first of all. So we don't have to go there and persuade God to show us favour. God's already favourably disposed towards us just because he's a gracious, merciful, compassionate, loving God. And what we're told to do is approach the throne of grace with confidence, okay? So you don't go mumbling, bumbling, you know, afraid to speak, nervous or hesitant. What these words literally say is this, go again and again to the throne of grace with bold frankness. It's really surprising. Go again and again to the throne of God with bold frankness. So you don't just go once and ask for something. You go again and again and again. Persist, persist, persevere, ask, ask, ask, ask.

Because often God leaves us waiting for answers. And you go back and you go back and you go back because God's timetable isn't always our timetable. And then we have to be frank with God. I think that's amazing. You don't need to beat about the bush with God. You don't need to dress up what you're saying in pious language. You don't need to find euphemisms for the crazy stuff that's going on in your life or the terrible things that you're ashamed of. You don't need to be vague. You can just go to God and be completely direct, completely open and to the point because you know what? You cannot shock Him. He's seen it all. He knows it all. Before you come and speak to Him, He knows what you're going to speak to Him about. He knows how you feel. He knows how you're struggling.

He knows that Christians say, God, you've forgotten me. You've abandoned me. You don't even remember me. You've forsaken me. I've looked to you for help, the psalm says. And guess what? You haven't helped me.

[23 : 16] God knows that we feel that way and we speak that way. And He says, speak to me that way. Tell me how it really is. Pour out your heart honestly and openly to me. And how will God respond?

Well, in the few minutes left, I'm going to say two or three things. First of all, with mercy. We're told we will receive mercy and find grace. How will God respond with mercy?

Hebrews places great emphasis on Jesus that He really became human. He's really God, but He's really human. And as a human being, He suffered. He was tempted. He went through tough times. And so in verse 15, it says, we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses. That's a double negative. We do not have a high priest who's unable to sympathize with our weaknesses. What's a double negative mean? Well, the double negative is actually a really strong positive. It's saying it's impossible for God, it's impossible for Jesus not to feel your pain. It's impossible for Jesus not to sympathize with you. Why? Because He's been there Himself.

[24 : 42] The Bible says in all our afflictions, He was afflicted. So you will get mercy. You'll get sympathy. You'll get compassion. Because Jesus can't show anything but compassion, because He's been there Himself. And the second thing is that He sends the Holy Spirit. That's the grace that God gives. He says in John 14, I will send you another comforter, someone else who will come and come with to fortify you. That's what it means, comfort.

Come and fortify. Come and strengthen. That's the Holy Spirit that Jesus was referring to. Here again, Calvin says, the word grace does not mean as elsewhere simply God's favor, but it also means the help of the Holy Spirit which comes to us by God's undeserved favor.

It is the help of the Holy Spirit. How does Jesus respond when you come to the throne of grace? He fills you again with the Holy Spirit who gives assistance, strength, endurance.

Now from our point of view, nothing might seem to happen. It's not as if a great shaft of sunlight will break through the darkness or your heart will go warm and fuzzy when you go to the throne of grace. It might, but most often it doesn't. A great deal of waiting and perseverance is required. But God says, judge me not on how you feel, but on what I promise. And what I promise is the Holy Spirit. I promise you myself in other words that I'll be there. Don't harden your hearts then. That's what we're told in verse 8 of chapter 3. Don't harden your hearts in these situations, but keep listening for the voice of God. Hebrews tells us again and again, fix your thoughts on Jesus. So open yourself to this truth. We are never alone. That's what Jesus says ultimately. We are never alone. That's our assurance. If Jesus is our high priest, then we have a champion who's always fighting for us. I listened to Joe Frazier, the great boxers of victory in Radio 4 last week. And they

said one thing about Joe Frazier was this. He always stood his ground. That's why he was admired as a boxer by other boxers. He never backed down.

Jesus never backs down for you. He is always fighting for you, always contending for you, always there for you. He'll never back off. He'll never leave you alone. He'll never abandon you.

[27 : 53] He will never forsake you. He is the one who is faithful. So whether you're a Christian or not, I want to say to you, is Jesus that you need in the time of suffering? Because he's so committed to us, loves us so faithfully that he's willing to suffer everything for us. He's born into poverty. He experiences rejection from his own family. He's hated by the authorities. He's abandoned by his friends when he needs them most. He gets injustice from the courts and he is executed in agony on a cross. And on that cross, he pleads with God, don't leave me alone. And God turns his face away.

Jesus abandoned to suffer in our place so that Jesus can say, you never need to be abandoned. I've gone through that for you. And because I've gone through that for you, I'll be there for you. And so I want to say, let's all of us be thankful for Jesus today. He stands as our brother and our advocate before God. God will accept us today because of Jesus and his sacrifice. And God feels our pain today through Jesus because of his sacrifice. And so we don't need to be ashamed when we come to God. Jesus took the shame for us. And we can come boldly, frankly, telling God how we are, who we are, and what life is like. That's an amazing thing to have. And I want to just say, let's really praise and worship Jesus for giving us this great promise, hope and assurance. I'm going to say a short word of prayer. We're going to sing our last song. Lord God, we pray that we would understand clearly what Jesus has done for us. And that the more clearly we see it, the more we fix our eyes, and the more we think it through, the more that we would be amazed and moved that Jesus Christ would take the shame, take the pain, take the loneliness, suffer the sorrow, so that he could stand beside us and be our champion and our brother and our advocate when we suffer. So may we hold on to Jesus today and trust him. Amen.