

Teach Us to Pray, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 1: Drawing Near to God: What Prayer Is

Hebrews 4:14–16

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Hebrews 4:14–16 is the doorway into this entire study, because it tells us what prayer most basically is before we say anything about how to do it. The doctrine at stake is the high priesthood of Jesus Christ and the access to God it secures. The writer has spent three chapters showing that Jesus is greater than the angels, greater than Moses, greater than the rest Israel never fully entered. Now he draws the practical conclusion: because we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, we may draw near to the throne of grace. Prayer, in other words, is not a religious technique we have mastered; it is access to God himself, purchased and held open by Christ. Make sure the class hears that our standing to approach God rests entirely on who Jesus is and what he has done, not on our performance, our eloquence, or our worthiness on a given day.

Two guardrails belong in your own mind as you teach. First, the “throne” here is occupied now. Christ has passed through the heavens and sat down at the right hand of God, reigning in the present, which is exactly why his throne is available to us today and not merely in some future age. Second, the access described is access through Christ alone. There is one great high priest, and we come to the Father through him, not through any other mediator. Hold those two truths quietly in place; they will matter even more in later lessons.

At the same time, this passage was never meant only to inform. It was written to weary believers who were tempted to drift away and stop drawing near at all. So aim at the heart as well as the head. Most of the people in your class already believe prayer is good and right; what many of them lack is the confidence to come. The formational target this week is to move students from the courtyard to the throne, from praying like cautious outsiders to praying like welcomed children. Send them home believing, deep down, that God is not reluctant, and intending to actually draw near this week.

Question 1

Student Question:

The writer calls Jesus “a great high priest who has passed through the heavens” (v. 14). Why does he ground our approach to God in the priesthood of Jesus, and what does it mean that our access to God rests on who Christ is rather than on how well we have performed?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin where the writer begins, with the identity of Jesus. The whole invitation of verse 16 hangs on the “therefore” that grows out of verses 14 and 15. We may draw near because we “have” a great high priest. Help the class feel how much weight that one fact carries. In the old covenant the high priest was the people’s appointed representative who could go where they could not, into the presence of God on their behalf. The writer says Jesus is that, and more, a “great” high priest who has “passed through the heavens” into the very presence of God and stayed there.

This means our access to God is grounded in a person, not in a performance. Notice what the passage does not say. It does not say, draw near because you have prayed enough, confessed thoroughly enough, or strung together the right words. It says draw near because of who Jesus is. That is profoundly freeing for people who secretly believe God listens to them in proportion to how well they have behaved that week.

Connect this to the larger argument of Hebrews. A priest is appointed to deal with the problem of sin, which is precisely the problem that keeps sinners at a distance from a holy God. Jesus deals with that problem once for all by his own blood (Hebrews 9 and 10), and then takes his seat. Because the sin question has been answered in Christ, the access question is answered too. Our confidence in prayer is really confidence in him.

Press the “rather than” in the question. The contrast is between resting our approach on Christ’s finished work and resting it on our own spiritual scorecard. Every Christian drifts toward the scorecard. The text pulls us back to Christ. Where a student is discouraged about prayer because of failure, this is good news; where a student is complacent, it is still a summons to come through Christ and not on their own supposed merit.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The high priesthood of Jesus Christ as the ground of our access to God (Hebrews 4:14; 7:23-25)
- Access to God grounded in the person and finished work of Christ, not in human performance
- Christ having passed through the heavens and seated at God’s right hand, reigning now
- The unique mediatorship of Jesus: we come to the Father through him alone
- Assurance in prayer as confidence in Christ rather than confidence in self

Discussion Prompts

- What practical difference does it make whether we think God hears us because of Jesus or because of how well we have done this week?
- Why is it good news that prayer depends on a person rather than on a performance?
- How would calling Jesus our ‘great high priest’ shape the way you start your next prayer?

Question 2

Student Question:

Think honestly about the last few times you prayed. Did you come to God as a person drawing near to someone you love and trust, or mostly as someone reciting words and checking a box? What does your honest answer reveal about the picture of God you actually carry?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the first of the self-examining questions, and the goal is honesty rather than information. Everyone in the room prays in some fashion, and most have settled into habits they have never really examined. Give them permission to be candid. Many sincere believers have quietly reduced prayer to a transaction or a ritual, words said before meals and bed, requests filed in emergencies, with little sense of actually coming near to a Person.

Help students see that how we pray reveals what we believe about God. A person who pictures God as distant and easily annoyed will pray briefly and defensively. A person who pictures God as a loving Father on a throne of grace will linger. The aim is not to shame anyone for thin prayers, but to surface the picture of God underneath them, because that picture is exactly what this passage means to correct.

Move the conversation toward hope. The good news of the lesson is that the God revealed in Hebrews 4 is far better than the cramped picture many of us carry. Invite students to name the gap between the God they approach in practice and the God this text describes, and assure them that closing that gap is the very thing the Spirit loves to do.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Prayer as relationship with a Person rather than mere ritual or transaction
- The way our practice of prayer exposes our working picture of God
- Self-examination as a healthy and ordinary part of the Christian life
- The difference between praying from duty and praying from trust

Discussion Prompts

- What does the way you typically pray suggest about how you picture God?
- When in your life has prayer felt most like genuinely drawing near to someone, and what was different then?
- What is one small change that would make your prayers feel less like a checklist and more like coming home?

Question 3**Student Question:**

The writer invites us to “draw near to the throne of grace” (v. 16). What is striking about calling God’s throne a throne of grace rather than a throne of judgment, and what does that tell us about the God we come to in prayer and the basis on which we come?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Linger over the phrase “throne of grace.” A throne is a place of authority and judgment; it is where a king renders verdicts. By every right, the throne of a holy God should be a place of dread for sinners. Yet the writer calls it a throne of grace, and that single word changes everything about how we approach it. We come to a King, yes, but a King who has decided to deal with us in mercy through his Son.

Help the class hold both words together. It is still a throne, so we do not come casually or presumptuously, as though God were merely a cosmic friend who exists to serve us. But it is a throne of grace, so we do not come cowering, as though we had to talk God into being kind. The text steers between flippancy and fear and lands us in confident reverence.

Point out that the throne is occupied and active right now. Christ has sat down at God’s right hand and reigns in the present. This is not a hope reserved for some future earthly reign; the throne of grace is open and accessible today, which is why we are told to draw near now, in our actual time of need. The kingship of Christ is a present reality, and prayer is one of its great privileges.

Finally, name the basis on which we come. We approach a throne of grace because grace, undeserved favor, is what flows from it toward us in Christ. That is why the passage can speak in the same breath of mercy for our failures and grace to help us. We never outgrow our need to come as recipients of grace; the mature Christian and the new convert approach the same throne on the same terms.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God’s throne as a place of grace for those who come through Christ
- Confident reverence: avoiding both flippancy and servile fear in prayer
- Christ reigning now at God’s right hand (the throne is presently occupied and accessible)
- Grace as the basis on which every Christian approaches God, from new convert to mature believer
- Prayer as a present privilege of life under Christ’s reign

Discussion Prompts

- How does calling God’s throne a ‘throne of grace’ change the way you would walk up to it?
- What does it look like to come reverently and confidently at the same time?
- If Christ is reigning now, how should that affect the urgency and hope with which we pray today?

Question 4

Student Question:

The text tells us to come “with confidence” (v. 16). When you pray, do you come boldly, or do you hang back, feeling unworthy or unsure that God wants to hear from you? Name the specific thing that most often makes you hesitate to draw near.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the word “confidence” into the student’s actual prayer life. The Greek behind it carries the idea of boldness, freedom of speech, the liberty to say everything that is on your heart without fear. Ask the class to measure their praying against that standard. Many will admit they pray cautiously, as though God were keeping score or might lose patience.

Draw out the specific obstacles. For some it is a particular sin they feel disqualifies them. For others it is a season of unanswered prayer that left them gun-shy. For others it is simply an inherited image of God as stern and remote. Naming the obstacle is half the battle, because the passage answers each of them: the same Christ who secures our access also sympathizes with our weakness and meets us with mercy.

Then turn the obstacle into an opportunity. The boldness Hebrews commands is not self-confidence or a brash demanding spirit; it is confidence in Christ. The shy and the bold can both come, because neither is leaning on themselves. Encourage students to bring the very hesitation they just named straight to the throne of grace, which is exactly the kind of need verse 16 has in view.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Boldness in prayer (freedom of access) as confidence in Christ, not self-confidence
- Common barriers to confident prayer: guilt, unanswered prayer, a distorted image of God
- The difference between bold access and a demanding or presumptuous spirit
- Bringing our hesitation itself to God as a legitimate ‘time of need’

Discussion Prompts

- What most often makes you hold back in prayer, and where do you think that came from?
- How is godly boldness different from a demanding attitude toward God?
- What would it look like to bring your hesitation about prayer to God as a prayer request itself?

Question 5

Student Question:

Verse 15 says our high priest is able to “sympathize with our weaknesses” because he “has been tempted in every respect as we are, yet without sin.” How does the full humanity of Jesus, together with his sinlessness, change the way we bring our struggles to God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 15 is one of the most comforting sentences in Scripture for the struggling believer. Our high priest is not remote and untouched; he is able to “sympathize with our weaknesses.” The word means to feel with, to suffer alongside. Jesus does not merely know about our frailty from a distance; he has lived inside it. Hunger, exhaustion, grief, betrayal, the pull of temptation, he has felt them in his own body and soul.

Hold the two halves of the verse together carefully, because both matter. Jesus was tempted “in every respect as we are,” which means there is no struggle we bring to him that he finds foreign. Yet he was “without sin,” which means his sympathy never curdles into excuse-making. He understands the weight of temptation more deeply than we do, precisely because he never gave in and so felt its full force. A sinless Savior is not a distant Savior; he is the only one strong enough to actually help.

This guards us against a common error. Some imagine that because Jesus was sinless, he cannot really relate to our messy lives, so they take their struggles to people instead of to him, or nowhere at all. The text says the opposite. His sinlessness does not disqualify him from sympathizing; it qualifies him to help. He is both the one who understands and the one with the power to do something about it.

Bring it home to prayer. Because our high priest sympathizes, we can be specific and honest in prayer rather than vague and respectable. We do not have to clean ourselves up before we come or hide the parts of us that feel weak. The weakness is exactly what he invites us to bring, and the throne we bring it to is a throne of grace.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The full humanity of Christ: truly tempted, truly able to sympathize (Hebrews 2:17-18)
- The sinlessness of Christ and why it strengthens rather than weakens his sympathy
- Honesty and specificity in prayer flowing from the sympathy of our high priest
- Guarding against the idea that Jesus cannot relate to our particular struggles
- Temptation itself is not sin; Christ felt its full force and did not yield

Discussion Prompts

- How does it change your prayers to know Jesus has personally felt the pull of temptation?
- Why does Jesus’ sinlessness make him better able, not less able, to help us?
- What is one struggle you have been too embarrassed to pray about that this verse invites you to bring?

Question 6

Student Question:

Is there a weakness, a temptation, or a private struggle you have quietly kept out of your prayers, as though God could not understand it or would not welcome it? What would change if you brought that very thing to the One who has been tempted in every way you have?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question follows hard on the heels of verse 15 and makes it personal. Nearly everyone keeps some corner of life walled off from prayer, a habit they are ashamed of, a doubt they fear is too dangerous to say out loud, a desire they assume God would frown at. Give the class quiet permission to recognize their own walled-off corner without requiring anyone to confess it aloud.

Name the lie underneath the silence. The reason we hide a struggle from God is almost always a wrong belief: that he does not understand, that he is shocked, or that he is waiting for us to fix it before he will listen. Verse 15 dismantles every version of that lie. There is no temptation we face that Jesus has not felt, and there is no part of us he is unwilling to meet with grace.

Then call for one concrete act of trust. Invite each student to choose the very thing they have kept out of their prayers and to bring it, this week, to the throne of grace. The point is not a dramatic emotional experience but a simple, honest sentence spoken to God about the thing they have been hiding. That single act often breaks the false picture of God that kept them at a distance.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Confession and honesty before God as an expression of trust, not a precondition for being heard
- The lies that keep us from bringing our real struggles to God
- The sympathy of Christ as the antidote to shame-driven silence
- Prayer as the place where hidden things are brought into the light and met with grace

Discussion Prompts

- What is one area of life you tend to leave out of your prayers, and why?
- What false belief about God keeps that area off-limits?
- What would it cost you, and what might it free in you, to bring that to God this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

To “draw near” was loaded language for people who knew the old covenant, where only the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place, and only once a year. What has changed so that ordinary Christians are now invited to draw near to God themselves, and what does this say about the access we have through Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

To grasp the weight of “draw near,” the class needs to feel the old arrangement it replaced. Under the law, access to God was carefully restricted. The Most Holy Place sat behind a heavy curtain, and only the high priest could enter, only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, and never without sacrificial blood. The whole system preached one sermon to ordinary worshipers: you cannot come in.

Now Hebrews tells ordinary believers to draw near themselves. What changed? Christ changed everything. By his death the barrier was dealt with; the Gospels record that the temple curtain was torn in two from top to bottom at the moment Jesus died. Hebrews 10 makes the point explicit: we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way he opened for us through his flesh. The restricted access of the old covenant has given way to open access in the new.

Underline what this says about the new covenant. Every Christian now has direct access to God through Christ. We do not need an earthly priest to go in on our behalf, and we certainly do not come through any other mediator, whether saint, angel, or anyone else. There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, and through him every believer may come. This is a theme the study will return to, but it is worth planting clearly here.

Let the contrast land devotionally. The same people who once could only watch from the courtyard are now welcomed all the way in. If we truly believed that, our prayers would change. The tragedy is not that the door is shut; the door has been thrown open at enormous cost. The tragedy would be to keep standing in the courtyard out of habit when Christ has opened the way home.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The restricted access of the old covenant (the curtain, the Day of Atonement, the high priest alone)
- The tearing of the curtain and the new and living way opened by Christ (Hebrews 10:19-22)
- The direct access of every believer to God under the new covenant
- One mediator between God and men, Jesus Christ; no other human mediator is needed or valid
- The old law fulfilled in Christ and the believer now living under the new covenant

Discussion Prompts

- Why was access to God so restricted under the old covenant, and what did that teach?

- What does the torn curtain tell us about what Christ accomplished for our prayers?
- If every Christian has direct access to God, why do we sometimes still pray as though we need to stand at a distance?

Question 8

Student Question:

If prayer is first of all drawing near to God, what would it look like this week for you to actually draw near on a regular basis, rather than only in emergencies? Name one concrete change in when, where, or how you will come to God.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the practical hinge of the lesson. Having established that prayer is drawing near, the question asks what drawing near will actually look like in this student's week. Many people pray almost exclusively in crises, treating God like an emergency service rather than a Father whose company they keep. The aim here is a small, concrete, repeatable step toward regular nearness.

Resist letting answers stay abstract. "I should pray more" changes nothing. Help students name the when, the where, and the how: a set time in the morning, a particular chair, a walk, a written list, a few honest minutes at lunch. The form matters less than the decision to come on purpose rather than only by reflex.

Encourage realism and grace. The goal is not a heroic regimen that collapses by Wednesday, but a sustainable rhythm of drawing near that they can actually keep. Remind them that the throne they are coming to is a throne of grace, so a missed day is not a slammed door. The invitation to draw near stands every single day, and they can begin again at any moment.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Regular, intentional prayer versus emergency-only prayer
- Concrete spiritual disciplines (time, place, pattern) as servants of relationship with God
- Sustainable rhythms of prayer rather than unrealistic regimens
- Grace toward ourselves when we fail, because we come to a throne of grace

Discussion Prompts

- When and where are you most likely to actually pray, and how could you build on that?
- What turns a good intention to pray into a habit that lasts?
- What is one specific, realistic step you will take this week to draw near regularly?

Question 9

Student Question:

The promise is that as we draw near we will “receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (v. 16). Why does it matter that prayer is presented here as receiving mercy and grace, rather than as a technique for getting what we want or a performance that earns God’s attention? How does this guard us from treating prayer as a way to manage or control God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal high point of the lesson, and it deserves careful handling. The purpose clause tells us why we draw near: to “receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” Both words are gifts. “Mercy” is God withholding the judgment our sins deserve; “grace” is God supplying help we have not earned. Prayer, then, is fundamentally about receiving from God, not extracting from God. We come with empty hands held open, not with leverage.

Set this squarely against two common distortions. The first treats prayer as a technique, a set of words or a level of fervency that, performed correctly, obligates God to deliver a desired result. The second treats prayer as a performance that earns God’s attention, so that the eloquent or the disciplined get heard and the rest do not. Verse 16 dismantles both. What we receive at the throne is mercy and grace, by definition unearned and uncontrollable. You cannot earn mercy, and you cannot manipulate grace; you can only receive them.

This is the place to gently name the prosperity error that haunts so much teaching on prayer. Scripture never presents prayer as a lever for compelling God to grant health, wealth, or comfort on demand. God is not a vending machine, and faith is not a coin that forces the desired item to drop. He gives mercy and grace to help, and he gives them in his wisdom, which is far better than our wish list. Later lessons will develop this; here, plant the truth that prayer aligns us to receive what God in his goodness gives, rather than arming us to get what we have decided we must have.

End on the warmth of the phrase “in time of need.” God is not annoyed by our neediness; he invites it. The throne of grace is built precisely for people in need, which is to say, for all of us, all the time. The Christian never graduates from needing mercy and grace, and that is not a defect to outgrow but the very posture in which we were made to live before God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Prayer as receiving God’s mercy and grace, not earning or extracting a result
- Mercy (judgment withheld) and grace (help supplied) as undeserved gifts
- A clear rejection of prayer as technique or performance that obligates God
- A clear rejection of prosperity and word-of-faith teaching: prayer does not compel God to grant health, wealth, or comfort
- God’s wisdom and goodness as the frame for what he gives in answer to prayer
- Ongoing dependence: the believer never outgrows the need for mercy and grace

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between receiving from God in prayer and trying to extract from him?
- How does verse 16 expose the error of treating prayer as a technique that guarantees results?
- Why is it actually good news that God gives mercy and grace in his wisdom rather than simply granting our wish list?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across Hebrews 4:14–16 as a whole: drawing near, a sympathetic high priest, a throne of grace, mercy and help in time of need. Name one specific way Jesus is reshaping how you come to God in prayer, and one step you will take this week to come the way this passage invites you.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone question asks the student to gather the whole passage into one personal resolve. Walk the class back through the movement of the text: we have a great high priest (the ground), he sympathizes with our weakness (the comfort), so we draw near to the throne of grace (the invitation) and receive mercy and grace to help in time of need (the promise). Each phrase reshapes how a Christian comes to God.

Invite specificity over sentiment. The question is not “did you enjoy the lesson” but “name one way Jesus is reshaping how you pray, and one step you will take this week.” Push gently for a concrete answer: a particular barrier they will stop letting keep them away, a particular time they will set aside, a particular thing they have hidden that they will finally bring.

Close the session by returning to the open curtain. The aim of the whole lesson is that students would leave the courtyard for the throne. Pray together, simply and confidently, as a class. Let your own praying model the boldness the passage commands, so they hear what it sounds like to draw near to a Father whose throne is a throne of grace.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Synthesis of the passage: high priest, sympathy, throne of grace, mercy and help
- Spiritual formation expressed in a concrete, nameable step
- Prayer as the lived response to the truth that the way to God stands open in Christ
- Modeling confident, grace-filled prayer within the body of believers

Discussion Prompts

- In one sentence, how is this passage changing the way you come to God?
- What single step will you take this week to draw near the way Hebrews invites?

- How can this class pray for you as you put this into practice?