

Teach Us to Pray

Lesson 1: Drawing Near to God: What Prayer Is -- Hebrews 4:14–16

For fifteen hundred years there was a curtain. It hung in the temple in Jerusalem, thick and tall, and it did one thing: it kept people out. Behind it was the Most Holy Place, where the presence of God was said to dwell, and almost no one was allowed in. Not the crowds who came with their lambs and their doves. Not even the priests who served day after day at the altar. Only the high priest, and only on one day a year, and never without blood. The ordinary worshiper stood in the courtyard, close enough to smell the smoke and hear the singing, and yet kept at a careful distance from the God he had come to worship. The message of that curtain was hard to miss. God is holy, you are not, and you cannot simply walk in.

Then the letter to the Hebrews makes an announcement so bold it would have stopped those worshipers in their tracks. We have a great high priest, it says, one who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God. And because of him, the invitation is no longer “keep your distance.” It is “draw near.” Come close. Come with confidence, right up to the throne, and find mercy and grace waiting for you there. The curtain that held the world at arm’s length from God has been opened by Christ, and the way in now stands wide.

You may know something of life on the wrong side of a curtain. Maybe prayer has always felt like talking into an empty room, or like knocking on a door that never opens. Maybe you carry a quiet sense that God is busy with weightier matters, or that he is mildly disappointed in you and would rather not be bothered. Many of us pray, when we pray at all, the way a nervous employee approaches a demanding boss: carefully, briefly, hoping not to make things worse. We believe in prayer in theory, and we keep our distance in practice.

That is where this study begins, not with techniques or formulas, but with an open door and an invitation. Before we ever learn how to pray, we need to know what prayer is, and Hebrews tells us in the plainest terms: prayer is drawing near to God. It is coming close to a Father whose throne, for those who are in Christ, is a throne of grace. Read these three verses slowly. Let them take apart the picture of a reluctant God, and let them set in its place the face of the One who threw the curtain open and said, come in.

Group Discussion: When people today talk about prayer, they often describe it as a technique, a last resort, or a way to feel calmer. Before we open the text, how would you describe what prayer actually is, and where do you think most people get the picture of God they carry into prayer? How might that picture either draw a person toward God or quietly keep them at a distance?

Personal Reflection: Hebrews invites us to come to God “with confidence,” yet many of us pray as though we are intruding, or as though God is reluctant to listen. When you imagine

approaching God in prayer, what is the look on his face in your mind? Where did that picture come from, and how closely does it match the throne of grace this passage describes?

Read Hebrews 4:14–16

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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.
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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.
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Hebrews 10:19–22, drawing near with a true heart in full assurance of faith through the blood of Jesus; Hebrews 7:23–25, Jesus our ever-living high priest who always lives to make intercession for us; Romans 5:1–2, peace with God and access into grace through our Lord Jesus Christ; Ephesians 2:18, through Christ we both have access in one Spirit to the Father; Psalm 145:18, the Lord is near to all who call on him in truth.