

# A FAVORITE VERSE

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Last week, in the midst of the church recognizing my birthday, something happened that got my attention. I was unaware that anything would be done and was surprised at all the things that were done. I've never experienced anything quite like it and will never forget it, but one thing that stood out for me was the cherry on top of the Sundae.

At the end of the lunch in the dining hall, we played the game called "How well did you know Pastor Mike? Patricia asked the people present questions such as: what is pastor Mike's favorite verse? A number of people immediately said Hebrews 4:16. I have two responses to that.

Well, as much as I use that verse, it is not my *personal* favorite verse. My personal favorite verse is, "For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor. 4:5). The second thing I would say is that as a pastor, it is one of the most important verses in the Bible for believers to know. The fact that so many people thought it was my favorite verse made my day because I realized they knew how important that verse was to me.

As I thought about what happened, it occurred to me that I quote that verse a lot, but maybe I should explain why I think it's so important.

We are saved by grace (Eph. 2:8).

We are accepted by grace (Eph. 1:6).

We grow by grace (2 Pet. 3:18).

We were established by grace (Heb. 13:9).

We have been given a spiritual gift by grace (Eph. 4:7).

We serve by grace (1 Cor. 15:10; 1 Pet. 4:10).

We suffer by grace (2 Cor. 12:9).

We are what we are by the grace of God (1 Cor. 15:10).

If you try to get saved by the law, you set aside the grace of God and Christ died in vain (Gal. 2:21). If you try to be justified by law, you have fallen from grace (Gal. 5:4). We can fall short of the grace of God (Heb. 12:15).

The point of the paragraph at the end of Hebrews 4 is that believers have a High Priest and, therefore, they should not hesitate to come boldly before the Lord and ask him for help. The book of Hebrews can be outlined around Jesus as God's Son-king (1:5-4:13) and Jesus as God's Son-priest (4:14-10:39). Hebrews 4:14-16 serves as a transition.

## You have a High Priest

*The Great High Priest* "Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession" (4:14). Jesus is not just a Priest. He is a High Priest, not a subordinate (Lang). He is not only a High Priest; He is a great High Priest. In the Old Testament, the High Priest passed through the courts and veils into the Holy of

Holies. Our High Priest has passed through the heavens (plural; see 2 Cor. 12:2) to the very presence of God, where He sits at the right hand of the majesty on high (1:3).

*Hold Fast* Because we have such a great High Priest, we ought to hold fast our confession. The Greek word “hold fast” denotes clinging (Westcott). Believers should be determined to cling to their confession, which implies public confession. Westcott says what is needed is “not simply private conviction, but a clear declaration of belief openly in the face of men” (Westcott).

*He can Sympathize* Someone might object that the problem with having such a great High Priest in heaven is that He cannot understand “weak me” on earth. In further explaining (“For”) why we should hold fast to our confidence, the writer answers that possible objection. “For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weakness but was in all points tempted as we are yet without sin” (4:15). Our High Priest can sympathize with our weaknesses. The Greek word translated “sympathize” is a compound word made up of two Greek words: “with” and “suffer.” “It expresses not simply the compassion of one who regards suffering from without, but the feeling of one who enters into the suffering and makes it his own” (Westcott). In the case of our High Priest, He sympathizes, suffers, and feels with our weaknesses. Walter Cronkite said a good journalist does not just know the public; he is the public. He feels the same things they do” (*Reader’s Digest*, June 1980, p. 120).

The Greek word translated “weakness” means “without strength.” It was used of physical illness (Phil. 2:26) and financial need (Acts 20:35). Yet it is “sufficiently comprehensive to include any form of felt need” (Guthrie). Jesus experienced human weakness when He experienced weariness, disappointment, the feeling of desertion, and shrinking from pain (Westcott). Therefore, He can understand firsthand what we experience. He is not like a doctor or nurse who has never had the problem the patient is experiencing.

Our High Priest can sympathize with our weaknesses because He was tempted like us but without sin. The objection that could be raised is, “If He was tempted and did not sin, how can His temptation be like mine? In the first place, temptation itself is not a sin (Guthrie). Perhaps, more importantly, only those who do not yield to sin can know the full intensity of temptation because, having not given in, they felt the extent of its force. (Westcott, quoted by Bruce). He felt the force of temptation like an immovable boulder endures the brunt of a raging sea (Hodges).

C. S. Lewis puts it like this. “A silly notion 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. After all, you find out the strength of (any) army by fighting against it, not by giving in. You find out the strength of the wind by trying to walk against it, not by lying down. A man who gives into temptation after five minutes does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is not why bad people, in one sense, know very little about badness. They have lived a sheltered life by always giving in. We never find out the strength of the evil impulse inside us until we try to fight it. 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.” (C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pp. 124-125).

Jesus was tempted “in all points,” that is, He experienced “every form of testing” (Bruce), and temptation “in every respect” (Guthrie) so He can sympathize with us (4:15) and “aid those who are tempted” (2:18), which is the next point the writer makes (4:16).

The shortest verse in the Bible is, “Jesus wept” (Jn. 11:35). Why was Jesus weeping? When He wept, He was standing outside the tomb of His beloved friend Lazarus. The verses following John 11:35 seem to suggest that Jesus was personally moved by the death of His friend. When the Jews saw Him weeping, they said, “See how He loved him!” (Jn. 11:36). Is there something deeper

here than personal grief at a funeral? The verses just prior to the famous verse about Jesus weeping say, “Therefore, when Jesus saw her (Mary) weeping and the Jews who came with her weeping, He groaned in the spirit and was troubled. And He said, ‘Where have you laid him?’ They said to Him, ‘Lord, come and see’” (11:33-34). When Jesus saw the scene, He was deeply moved emotionally. An authority on Greek words says that the Greek word translated “groaned” means “such deep emotion seized Jesus that an involuntary groan was wrung from His heart.” He adds, “So deeply did Jesus enter into men’s sorrows that his heart was wrung with anguish” (Barclay). The Greek word translated “trouble” means “to be disturbed, stirred up.” “Jesus was profoundly moved” (Morris). Based on the prior verses it is safe to say that moved by the mourning of others Jesus wept.

It is interesting to note that in this passage, several different Greek words are used for weeping. The mourners, including Mary, wept out loud. The Greek word used of Jesus weeping indicates that He did not weep out loud like the others. Tears trickled down His cheeks. At any rate, the point is, He could sympathize with the intensity of His friend’s grief. He wept with those who weep.

## **Come Boldly to God’s Throne**

*Come Boldly* Since believers have a High Priest who can sympathize with us (4:15) and is able to aid those who are tempted (2:18), “Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (4:16). God sits on the throne. He is the transcendent sovereign. All are in awe before His throne, but seated next to Him at His right hand is our High Priest, who has been tempted like us, so He can sympathize with us (1:3). Therefore, His throne is a throne of grace.

Believers should “come” to the throne. The Greek word rendered “come” here is translated “draw near” in Hebrews 10:22 (see also Ac 7:31).

Believers should not only draw near but do it “boldly.” The Greek word “boldly” here is the same one translated “confidence” in Hebrews 3:6 (see also 10:19). It means “plainness of speech, fearlessness, courage, confidence.” One authority suggests that it is used here in its primary sense of “giving utterance to every thought and feeling and wish” (Westcott). Believers should draw near unencumbered by man’s awe in God’s presence with deliverance from fear and freedom of expression (Guthrie).

Many years ago, an elderly gentleman sat outside the main gate to the White House in Washington, D. C. His threadbare clothes were covered with dust, and his eyes were filled with tears. A young boy stopped and sympathetically asked why he was crying. The man said that his son was in the Army and was condemned to be shot because he had deserted his post. “The guards on the White House grounds will not let me see the President,” said the distraught man. “Mr. Lincoln is so kind and generous. If he heard the full details of my son’s desertion, I feel sure that he would pardon him,” “I can take you to the President,” said the boy. “You?” asked the man with surprise. “Yes, he’s my father. He lets me come in and talk with him anytime I feel like it.” The little fellow took the man into the White House, and after Lincoln heard the story, he did indeed pardon the condemned soldier.

*For Mercy and Grace* The purpose of drawing near is to obtain mercy and grace. The mercy is for past failure and the grace is for present need. More specifically, the grace is to “help” in time of need. The Greek word translated “help” means “to help, support.” In the New Testament, it is

only used here and in Ac 27:17, where it is used of cables undergirding or supporting a ship. God's grace given in answer to believing prayer supports; it gives strength for weakness (2 Cor. 12:9).

It has been said that Jesus was rejected by His own people, betrayed by Judas, denied by Peter, deserted by His followers, mocked by bystanders, and abused by the soldiers. He hung on the cross for six hours, enduring the physical pain of crucifixion. No matter what kind of affliction we experience, Jesus understands. He knows the hurt of being rejected, misunderstood, and hated. He knows grief and agony. When we come to Him, we have the assurance He understands exactly how we feel. He does not just understand the facts of what we're going through, He enters the feeling of our experience.

He got hungry. He got tired. He got frustrated with people. He laughed. He cried. He loved people. He was used by people. He was hurt by people. He was misunderstood by those closest to him. He was finite. He was limited to time and space just as are.

**Summary:** Since we have a sympathetic High Priest, let us cling to our confession and come with confidence to the Lord for grace.

A pastor says, "Come with me to a third-grade classroom. There is a nine-year-old kid sitting at his desk, and all of a sudden, there is a puddle between his feet, and the front of his pants was wet. He thinks his heart is going to stop because he cannot possibly imagine how this has happened. It's never happened before and he knows that when the boys find out, he will never hear the end of it. When the girls find out, they'll never speak to him again for as long as he lives.

The boy believes his heart is going to stop, so he puts his head down and prays this prayer: "Dear God, this is an emergency! I need help now! Five minutes from now, I'm dead meat." He looks up from his prayer, and here comes the teacher with a look in her eyes that says that he has been discovered. As the teacher is coming to snatch him up, a classmate named Susie is carrying a goldfish bowl that is filled with water. Susie trips in front of the teacher and inexplicably dumps the bowl in the boy's lap. The boy pretends to be angry, but all the while is saying, "Thank you, Jesus! Thank you, Jesus!"

Now all of a sudden, the boy is the object of sympathy. The teacher rushes him downstairs and gives him gym shorts to put on while his pants dry out. All the children are on their hands and knees around his desk, cleaning up the mess. The sympathy is wonderful! The ridicule that should have been his was transferred to someone else, Susie. As the day progresses, the sympathy grows better and Susie's ridicule grows worse.

At the end of the day, they are waiting for the bus. Susie has been shunned by the other children. The boy walks over to Susie and says, "Susie, you did that on purpose, didn't you?" Sue whispers back, "I wet my pants once too."

One day Andrew Bonar was ministering at Northfield, Massachusetts. D. L. Moody, who was in charge, said impulsively, "Dr. Bonar, these people would like to know how you live this victorious life about which you have been preaching. Tell us your experience." With some hesitation, Bonar quietly replied, "I do not like to speak about myself, but for 50 years, I have had access to the Throne of Grace."