

Hebrews 4:9-16 – especially vs.14-16

9 So there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. 10 For the one who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God rested from his work. 11 Therefore, let us make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall into the same pattern of disobedience. 12 For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword. It penetrates even to the point of dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow, even being able to judge the ideas and thoughts of the heart. 13 And there is no creature hidden from him, but everything is uncovered and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we will give an account. 14 Therefore, since we have a great high priest, who has gone through the heavens, namely, Jesus the Son of God, let us continue to hold on to our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin. 16 So let us approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

How many of you have recently thought – maybe even this morning already – “I’m so tired”?

That reality in some instances is less about the physical, and more about the emotional toll taken on us. We deal with weighty circumstances of life. Have they left you feeling any of the following? “I’m so *worn out* from just thinking about it.” - “I’m exhausted – my tank is on fumes – from reacting and handling all that is happening lately.” – Or, “The second guessing of how I handled the problem, if it was good or if I should have done something differently, has left me all the more weary.” Whichever of those you can relate with, have you ever ended up thinking: “I just need a break from the stress of it – I’m so tired”?

People dealing with stress is a topic all over the news. Do an internet search. Better yet, don’t. Save yourself the stress. Stress seems to be something that is endlessly talked about and written about these days. Maybe that’s because the studies show that it is notably on the rise. The statistics pile up: stress affects our sleep, it can affect what we eat, it affects our digestive system, and the immune system, it affects memory and overall mental health as well.

One tactic attempted in reply is to try to bury stress. Some try through partying, self-medicating or some other form of pleasure-seeking escape (which often have their own complicating or damaging aspects). Others turn to what they call “being spiritual,” though by that some mean merely a turning within themselves for a remedy. You’ll hear suggestions that if you just clear your mind, you’ll relieve your stress and arrive at a peace you can’t find anywhere else. Or if a person’s stress is from their conscience weighing on them, the religion of man tells us: try to do enough to make God happy. Live a good life – be kind – then put your mind at rest for surely then God will have a place in heaven for you (probably with a really good view).

No. No. No. All those efforts are futile – they bring no lasting peace.

What does God offer to us as relief for our stress? How does he provide us – his people – rest? Is there a way to be at rest, even as we go through the troubles and recurring challenges of life? Let’s see...

Close your eyes, just for a moment. Picture yourself being given a glimpse of the throne of God. It's a scene that occurs a precious few times in all the Bible's pages. The Lord brought Isaiah (ch.6), Ezekiel (1:25f), Daniel (7:9f), and John (Revelation ch.4, ch.5, and other chapters) to this very site, the throne of God, in visions given to them. And now, Hebrews ch.4 places us into the scene.

You and I are the ones told: "Approach the throne – God's throne." Ok, quick: identify the thoughts and feelings weaving through your mind at the sound of that. "Approach the throne of God? Me?"

At first consideration, you maybe shudder in horror at the thought of it. How can you stand in God's presence? God's Word has penetrated so deeply into you and has cut away the "cover-ups" that maybe you've tried at one time or another. And you realize that while you may be able to hide your weaknesses, failures, wickedness and vulnerabilities from other people, before God you stand naked. WE stand naked. All our innermost thoughts and all our otherwise hidden behaviors are exposed.

You drop all excuses. You confess. You and I, like James and John in our Gospel lesson, have struggled with selfish ambition. Your ambitions – my ambitions – may have not propelled us to ask for a seat at Jesus' right or left side in glory, like James and John. But that's not to say we don't have ambition of our own styling. And our ambitions – about wanting people to recognize us, to look up to you, to listen to you, to serve you – these ambitions have often carried us out of step with God's will.

Besides that, we're not immune to how the other disciples in our Gospel lesson behaved. Look at the anger and frustration of the 10. Have you there when you've seen the sinful ambition of others close to you? Has your temper ever done its ugly worst? ...getting mad at someone for what they did, while somewhere inside simultaneously wishing "if only I had thought of what they had before them"?

And our frustration can even get so mixed up that it gets turned against God. Have your insides ever gotten so muddled in feelings that the feeling surfaced: "you're not treating us fair, Lord"?

God's Word cuts to our hearts. It corrects us. And you and I come crashing back to reality: What if the Lord were fair, in the sense of treating us based on what our deeds deserve? Would we want that? We acknowledge that we deserve nothing but the Lord's righteous anger and condemnation.

Isaiah – remember I mentioned him earlier – when he saw the Lord on his throne, high and exalted, Isaiah reacted in horror. He came clean in an instant and acknowledged his sin. Then, in quick reply, an angel broke formation from the others who were singing. The seraph was charged with another task from the Lord. He flew to the altar, and then to Isaiah. The angel came right to him, a coal from the altar in his hand, and a declaration from God rolling off his tongue... "See this has touched your lips. Your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

The same good news is brought to us in the scene in Hebrews, where we are told to “approach the throne” of God. Only here - before our eyes - no angel is placed in view. Instead, it is Jesus the Son of God. And we hear about him...

He knows what we face in our earthly lives. He can relate. His heart can empathize. Literally: he “feels with us.” Our English word is derived directly from the greek “συμπαθησαι.” He set aside the perfect “rest” of paradise. He humbled himself, he became one of us, and he served all of us.

In that service, he experienced every type of temptation we have. He faced the stresses of life. Do you face strife in your family? He did. He was rejected by his own brothers. At one time they said, “He is out of his mind!” They tried to intervene and whisk him out of the public eye, because they were embarrassed by him. Having trouble with coworkers? Neighbors? False friends? The world heaped abuse on Jesus – cruel rejection, venomous words, murderous thoughts. He knows what it is like to face scenes in life that are anything but peaceful. Have you been through war and all it entails? Jesus warred with Satan himself, faced every temptation but never fell. Then, he went through hell in our behalf, and died. But he came out the victor! He rose to life. He ascended through the heavens.

This is what it means: we have a great High Priest. He brought the sacrifice to make us right with God. Only once did he have to bring his sacrifice: himself! Only once did he have to serve as the sacrifice: pouring his own life out – dying to bring us life. We have eternal life through faith in him. His life flows in the heart and soul of each of you – each one – who believes in him that he is our life.

With the altar of His cross as the backdrop, and with our risen Savior standing front and center for our eyes to see, now we are told to approach the throne of God with confidence.

And we can! And we do! For this is the One who calls to us... “Come to me. All you are weary and burdened, come. And I will give you rest. I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls.”

Here – at the throne of grace – the King declares the guilty “not guilty” – in Christ Jesus. Be at rest. Through faith in Jesus you are at peace with God. Hold firmly to this faith.

And pour out your hearts to him, O people of God. Approach the throne of grace through all of your life. Here we meet our God who is ready, waiting and eager to hear us, to help us. We come honestly:

- confessing sin – receiving forgiveness,
- pouring out sorrow – being comforted,
- laying down weakness – being strengthened,
- carrying our every request – being answered.

You, child of God through faith, aren’t left to wonder: “Should I go there? What kind of response am I going to get when I approach God?” Your God has clearly spoken of the reception you’ll receive.

To wrap up, let's give the children a chance to see this at a level that will help them, and Lord-willing all of us, carry this truth from today with us. Children, come on up here for a couple minutes.

Picture a throne. [Show a picture.] Make sure a king is seated there. Imagine if you were a citizen in the country where this was the king. Say that you need to request help from this king. How would you approach him and ask your question? If it was me, even more than uncertainty about what I should do or how I should say things, what I'd be wondering is: "Is he going to care about my request? Is he going to help me? I just don't know."

Compare that to the way you'd approach your father, to ask him something. As a son or daughter, you'd walk right up. You sometimes probably sit right beside him. He may even put his arm around you. If young enough still, if you haven't gotten too big, do some of you still climb right onto your daddy's lap? Then you start talking. It is natural. You're comfortable. Why? How can you be so certain that he'll listen and he'll help you if that's what you need? Well, if he is a father who has showed he loves you, you know he cares.

We can bring our requests to God in the same way, having an even greater confidence and certainty. You know He cares. Jesus loves you so much He lived and died for you. So now through Him you are forgiven. And because of that, God assures you: He is eager to hear from you and He'll always help you when you are in need. The Psalms direct us:

Psalm 62:5 Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him. ⁶ He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken. ⁷ My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge. ⁸ Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge.

So... *Hebrews 4:16 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.*

Amen.