The Place of Grace
Hebrews 4:14-5:10

As we've seen, this letter of Hebrews was written to a group of people who felt like giving up. Not on life in general, but on the Christian faith. Life was hard for them and getting harder, as the level of persecution against Christians increased. And some of them at least were considering going back to the synagogue, and turning away from Christ, because at least Judaism was a protected religion and they'd be safe there.

And the writer, who knows them well, they're his friends, is writing to encourage them not to do that. He wants them to see that Jesus and trusting Jesus is so much better than turning back to the old ways. And so far he's told them that Jesus is greater than the angels who mediated the Law to Moses. Then he's shown them how Jesus is greater than Moses himself, the very one they were tempted to turn back to. Then last week we saw how he shows them that Jesus is greater than Joshua – the leader who took the people of Israel into the Promised Land, and in particular that Jesus offers a greater, better rest from inner restlessness, than Joshua could ever achieve by physical rest in the Promised Land. That Jesus is the ultimate rest-giver – a rest that safety and security could never offer.

But at the end of chapter 4 he takes up a theme that he's already mentioned in passing, and that he's going to run with until the end of chapter 10, barring a short and deliberate diversion around chapter 6. He wants them to see that not only is Jesus greater than angels, and Moses and Joshua – he's also greater than Aaron. He wants them to see that Jesus is greater than the archetypal Jewish High Priest. That the very foundation on which the Jewish people approached God, through the High Priest, has been superseded. That both for them and us, when it comes to approaching God, and gaining the access you need to the resources you need when life is hard, Jesus is the real deal, not Aaron or his descendants in the priesthood, or anyone else.

So today we're going to look at the help you need, the place you need to go to get it, and the one person you need to get you there.

The Help You Need
Now you may hear that and think, thanks Martin, but I don't need any help – I'm fine thank you very much. Which may or may not be true – but any look at the best-seller lists will tell you that there is a massive market for self-help books. Whether that is to help you be more confident, or become a highly successful person, or go from good to great, or conquer depression, or lose weight, the very fact that there is a market for such books tells us, that at least some of us are not as happy with our current situation as we might want people to think. We realize that we're not where we want to be, we're not happy with the status quo, that there is some sense of need, of lack about our lives.

Now for these people he's writing to, there was no doubt in their minds that that was the case. They knew they were in trouble, and they felt like they didn't have the strength or the stamina or the resources to keep going, to hang in there as Christians.

And you might know exactly what that feels like. When life is hard and suffering comes your way it's not just first century Christians in Rome who feel like they can't keep going any longer.

But that sense of need, that sense of lack isn't limited to the dark times. If we're honest with ourselves, even when life is good we recognize that we're not where we want to be, that we want to grow, that we want to change. We wish we were more patient, and less angry, we wished we loved more and were less selfish.

But the question is, where do you go to, where do you turn to when you know you need, when you know you're not where you want to be? Where do you look for the resources when life is hard and you feel weak? For the people he's writing to, and for us, where do you find the strength to stay faithful and steadfast in trial?

Of course, if you follow the advice of the self-help books, the answer is that you look inside yourself, that you have the inner resources already, and they just need to be unlocked. But that of course depends on what you're looking for doesn't it? It depends on what you want to see unlocked.

You see, if I were to ask you 'how many of you want to become more proud over the coming year? Or how many of you want to be more vengeful in 5 years times than now, or to have instilled into your family a deep fear, or how many of you want to have your own name and reputation increasingly become the thing that defines you, I doubt many, if any, of you would say – yes, that's me, I want to be more proud, more vengeful, more driven by fear and reputation. And yet those are precisely the qualities that are valued in honour-shame cultures, the very qualities that were admired in pagan Europe before it was Christianised. And the reason you don't think like that – the reason you want to grow in humility rather than pride, in forgiveness rather than vengeance, in love rather than fear, is that as a society we have been so profoundly influenced by the gospel of Christ.

So these qualities we aspire to – courage in trial, faithfulness in suffering, growth in patience and love and forgiveness and selflessness, don't come from inside us at all. We'd be looking in the wrong place if we thought we could find the help we need in here. The reason we value what we value is because the values of the gospel and in particular the character of Christ have so profoundly permeated our culture. Which is why the writer points his friends somewhere other than inside to get the help and the resources they need.

The Place You Need to Go to Get it

I think one of *the* great dangers for people who are able and successful, as many of you are, is that you become, at least in your thinking, self-sufficient. That when you know you need help, you do exactly what the self-help gurus say and look inside. But listen to what the writer says, v16: 'Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.'

Now we Brits and the Dutchies amongst us are experts on thrones and the kings and queens who sit on them. And all that history tells us something, and that is, in the words of Lord Acton, that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. But it doesn't seem to much matter whether you call the man on the throne a king or a president – power can still corrupt. And that makes what the writer says all the more remarkable, because he says the throne that we are to come to – the throne of God, the place of ultimate authority and power, the place where we can find the help we need in in time of need, is a throne of grace. Not a throne of power plays, or manipulation, or using people for your own gain, or of greed but a throne of grace. The throne room of God the writer says, the centre of his rule and sovereignty is a place where undeserved blessing and mercy and grace and resource, for these guys in need of courage and for you and I when we know we are in need, is freely available. And that rather than withdraw into introspection, as the self-help gurus would have you do, we are to draw near to God for everything we need.

But you can also read that description that it's a throne of grace another way. You see, in ancient times, or maybe not so ancient, if you wanted someone in power to act on your behalf, you had to make it worth their while. Sure you could earn their favour, but you had to earn it. You could win their favour, but it would cost you a bribe to do so. But the writer says, look, the place where you can find all the resources for life that you need, the throne of God, is a place where you can and must come empty handed. You can't buy or bribe your way in, there's no need to prove yourself, it's a place of grace where the undeserving and ill-deserving can find what they need. And because it's a place of grace you can come with confidence – you're not about to be turned away.

But of course that begs the question, 'hang on a second, how can that be?' Because if you know anything about worship in the Old Testament you'll know that both the tabernacle and then the temple, where God was worshipped, were split into two rooms, which were divided by a curtain. The first room was the Holy Place and the priests could go in there and offer sacrifices every day. But the second room, was the Most Holy Place, and only one man, the High Priest, could enter that room and that only once a year on the Day of Atonement when sacrifice was made for the sins of the nation. And that Most Holy Place, which contained the Ark of the Covenant, was seen as God's throne – where God was enthroned above the cherubim whose wings covered the ark, the mercy seat.

So far from these Jewish Christians or you and I being allowed to approach God's throne boldly and confidently, we couldn't approach at all. In fact we needed a mediator, a go-between, the High Priest who would bridge the gap between a holy and awesome God and his people who were anything but holy. And he was only allowed to enter once a year.

Now, of course, to our modern ears all talk of us needing a mediator, a go-between, between us and God, seems bizarre. We think God should be grateful for us coming. In fact, rather than seeing God on the throne, we think of ourselves on the throne and God as our servant whose role is to do our bidding.

And even if we do see God as being greater and more holy than us, we tend to think that we gain access to him by earning it, or deserving it, or making ourselves worthy of his attention. But of course none of that adequately deals with the picture the Bible portrays of an awesome and Holy God who cannot tolerate sin and that there's nothing we can do that can make us worthy to come.

So we need someone who can break through the curtain, someone who can tear down the curtain that separates us from God. You see, if the help we need is to be found at God's throne, we need someone who will enable us to enter the throne room.

The One You Need to Get You There.
Now, you know when you go for a new job, in the job description there's often a list of essential and desirable criteria and if you want the job you've got to be able to tick all the essentials. Well, in v1-4 of chapter 5 the writer sets out a list of essential criteria for someone to serve as Jewish High Priest. If they are to act as this go-between between the people and God, the High Priest has to be one of the people. In the words of v1, he's got to be 'chosen from among men… to act on behalf of men in relation to God.' And because he's one of them he can, in the words of v2, 'deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness.'

You see, you can look at other people's lives and the mess they're in and just feel indifferent about it, and it not touch you – that's their problem, what's it got to do with me, kind of attitude; or you can see it and start pointing the finger and get angry and exasperated. Or you can realize that actually you are no different from them – the sins you struggle with might be different, but the fact you struggle isn't – that, before God, we're all on the same level. In fact, when the writer says the High Priest is himself beset with weakness he uses a verb that means to be wrapped around with weakness – the High Priest wears weakness like he wears his robes. He's needy, just like the people he's serving are needy, just like the Christians the writer is writing to are needy, just like you and I are needy– the High Priest stands in need. And because he knows that, he can deal gently with others. Hard on the sin, sure, calling sin what it is, but gentle on the sinner.

So, as a result, the writer tells us in v3 that the High Priest 'is obligated to offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for those of the people.' Before he can enter the Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement, and come before the throne of God once a year, and offer the animal sacrifice to atone for the people's sins, he's got to first sacrifice an animal to atone for his own sins.

But the final essential criteria for a High priest, if he is to be a genuine High Priest, a genuine mediator between man and God, is that not only must he come from among the people, he's also got to be appointed by God: v4, 'And no one takes this honour for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was.' This isn't something you wake up one morning and say, 'hmm, I think I'll become a High Priest.' This is something that God appoints you to.

Now, you might say, Martin, that is all well and good, that's a nice bit of ancient theology, but what use is that when you're living in first century Rome in danger of being arrested at any moment and dragged to your death. And what use is talk of a Jewish High Priest when you and I are struggling with our own stuff, when life is hard and you feel like quitting, or life is good but you still know you aren't where you want to be. What's a high priest got to do with you and me?

Well, look at what the writer says. He says that not only was Christ God's Son – v5, quoting again from Psalm 2, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you,' he has also been appointed by God as a High Priest. And to show that he quotes in v6 from Psalm 110 – which he's going to keep on coming back to over the next few chapters: 'You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.'

And by joining Psalm 2 and Psalm 110 together he wants them and you and me to see that the perfect Son of God has also become the perfect High Priest – greater than anyone, or anything on offer anywhere else.

You see, whilst the Jewish High Priest was wrapped around with weakness, while he could sympathise with sinners like us because he *was* one, the writer says that though Jesus was a real man, just like us, v15, 'who in every respect has been tempted as we are' yet he never sinned. The Jewish High Priest was needy just like the rest of us. But Jesus wasn't – not like that anyway. The High Priest and the rest of us – we all face temptation and sometimes we resist it and sometimes we cave in under it. But Jesus never did. He bore the full force of temptation long after you and I give in. And the writer is saying to his friends, look, whatever you go through in life, Jesus has been there. You face arrest – so did he. You face the betrayal of friends – so did he. You know what it is to spend the night crying out to God in tears, so did he. You face the need to trust God daily – so did he. Jesus knows what it is to feel weak, to face trials, to endure suffering. And he stayed faithful. Jesus felt the urge to turn and run in the face of trial and suffering, but he didn't. He resisted it. And because he knows that, he can help.

So the fact that Christ never sinned does not make him immune to suffering – rather he knows what it is to weather the full storm surge of evil, and stand.

But then the writer says something remarkable. He says in v8, 'although [Jesus] was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.' Now in the old days, if you were the oldest son of the king, if you were a prince, you didn't have to work to inherit your kingdom, it was yours by birthright. And even today, you'll see some guys who get on to the board of the company and make it to the top because they're the son, of the owner. And the writer's saying, listen, if anyone could have given himself a free-pass on suffering, it's the Son of God. If anyone could have excused himself from the hard grind of life, it was Jesus. But he didn't. And through all the suffering he went through, and staying faithful to God through it all, he learned what it means to stay faithful in trials, to stay obedient to God even when everything screams out 'run away and save yourself'.

And then the writer says in v9, 'and being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.'

Now when the writer says 'Jesus was made perfect' he doesn't mean, 'once upon a time he wasn't perfect'. That word made *perfect* means to reach the end of training, to be fully equipped, to be made complete for his role.

But what was that role? It was to become the source of eternal salvation. You see, the Jewish High Priest had to offer a sacrifice for his own sins, before he could hope to atone for the sins of the people. But Jesus didn't offer any animal sacrifices, rather on the cross he became the perfect atoning sacrifice for our sins. He didn't offer an animal – he offered himself. And he did that because of his great love for you.

And the gospel writers tell us that when he died on the cross the curtain in the temple – that divided the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place, the curtain behind which the High Priest could only go once a year, was torn in two from top to bottom.

So what the High Priest could never do – Jesus did. In dying for our sins, and rising again from the dead, he broke the power of sin and death, he has dealt with our sin and our shame, and that means we can enter the throne room, the Most Holy Place, we can approach the throne of grace, with confidence. Confident not in ourselves, that we have somehow made ourselves worthy to come, but confident in Jesus, who has made a way for us.

And so, rather than turn away from God when life gets hard, rather than look inside ourselves when we need help, because of Jesus, our great High Priest, we can draw near to the place of grace. You can approach God in prayer. You can ask others to pray for you and with you, because you know that the real help you need doesn't come from inside you, it comes from the throne room of grace.

And when the depth of Christ's love for us sinks in – when we understand that he faced what he faced and stood firm under temptation and suffering out of his desire to obey the Father and win us back to him, then we will find the courage and the strength and the willingness to stand firm for him when we face trials – to 'hold fast our confession', as the writer says in v14, when we feel like letting go. When we see how Jesus obeyed even when it cost him everything and he did so out of his great love for us, then we too will obey, and find him to be the source of every help we need – the source of our eternal salvation.