

HOLD ON AND GET HELP**HEBREWS 4:14-16**

Helen Roseveare was a British missionary who became a worldwide speaker and author. She passed away just last month actually. She tells about a time when she came home from church one evening. She was struggling to recognize God's will for her life. Suddenly, she drove into dense fog and could see nothing. Poking her head out the window, she noticed tiny headlights approaching her. As she inched her car forward, the oncoming car passed her and another set of oncoming headlights took its place some yards ahead. She crawled along, following just the short distance she could see—one set of headlights after another--until the fog cleared. Then Helen realized that this is how God guides us. He shows us how far we need to go at any given moment. And step-by-step, we move from one light to the next confident of God's guidance.

We don't really know for sure what will happen in this new year of our lives, do we? We fill up our calendars with anticipated activities, but we can't be certain any will actually take place. But here's one reality I can guarantee will happen to every person in this sanctuary. There will come a time in your life – and it may happen in 2017 – when you come to the end of your rope. I guarantee it. The circumstances will be different, but each of us will face that reality in life sooner or later. For some of us it might be facing death – either our own death or the death of someone we love dearly. For others of us, it might be a marital issue, a job crisis, a financial reversal, a very serious health concern, or troubling problems with our kids of one kind or another. Some of us might face times of great loneliness, intense discouragement, and deep disappointment. Others will endure hurt or betrayal. The Bible itself says, "People are born for trouble as readily as sparks fly up from a fire." (Job 5:7 NLT) What will you do this year if you come to the end of my rope? God's Word can provide the answer.

We've begun a new message series entitled *Get After It! The "Let Us" Challenges in Hebrews*. There's a phrase in the New Testament book of Hebrews that shows up about fifteen times depending on what English translation you might use. It's the phrase "let us." Each "let us" provides a challenge, an exhortation, or a word of encouragement either to stop doing or to start doing something that impacts your life spiritually. Today's message is about holding on and getting help especially when you come to the end of your rope. I sincerely hope that you're not at the end of your rope this morning, but some day this year or some other year you will be. This is a Bible passage you should become very familiar with now, because you will want and need to be reminded of its truth then - someday – perhaps even on a day in 2017.

Just three verses today, but they're powerful indeed. Most of us here today already know that being a follower of Jesus doesn't exempt us from life's testings, heartaches, and struggles. But that was a new discovery for the very first followers of Jesus. Hebrews was written by a Jewish Christian to other Jewish Christians a few decades after Jesus died, rose again, and ascended back to Heaven. Some of these new disciples were being persecuted for their allegiance to Jesus and were tempted to return to Judaism and all of its religious rituals. Why? Just less hassle and fewer problems. Besides, if Jesus was truly the Messiah, why wasn't He protecting them from all this

persecution? Some of them were at the end of their rope. There are two “let us” phrases found here. “So then, since we have a great High Priest who has entered heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to what we believe.” (Heb. 4:14 NLT) The other one says, “So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most.” (Heb. 4:16 NLT) Or, to put it succinctly, hold on and get help! Two big truths today. First,

YOUR HIGH PRIEST IDENTIFIES WITH YOU.

One of the major themes in Hebrews is the presentation of Jesus as our great High Priest. Why was that important? The high priest was a very important part of Judaism back then. He was the man who offered animal sacrifices on the altar at the great temple in Jerusalem so the sins of the Jewish people could be forgiven. The author of Hebrews was saying to his original audience, “Now, listen, before you go back into Judaism and the ministry of the high priest, please understand something important. Jesus was and is the High Priest. All those high priests down through many generations of Jewish people were all pointing to Jesus and paving the way for Him. They were symbols pointing to the reality that was and is Jesus. Why go back to the symbolic now that the real thing has arrived? Why return to Judaism, when the good news about Jesus is the fulfillment of the Jewish faith? Why rely on the ministry of all imperfect high priests when you can receive the ministry of the perfect High Priest?”

What did it take to be a high priest? Two fundamental qualifications were presented in the next two verses after the ones we read today. “Every high priest is a man chosen to represent other people in their dealings with God. He presents their gifts to God and offers sacrifices for their sins. And he is able to deal gently with ignorant and wayward people because he himself is subject to the same weaknesses.” (Heb. 5:1-2 NLT) Perhaps it sounds silly, but the first qualification for a high priest was to be a human being! Not an angel, mind you, or some other kind of supernatural being. He had to be a human being like you and me. The second qualification for a high priest was compassion. He had to be a person who dealt kindly with human weaknesses and knew from personal experience the many struggles and troubles of life.

Jesus met both qualifications. He’s fully God and fully human in every sense of the word. Additionally, Jesus was and is filled with compassion. Sure, he knew well all the joy and fun of being a human being; more importantly, He understood only too well the power of the temptations, trials, struggles, and sorrows of being a human being. We read today, “This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin.” (Heb. 4:15 NLT) In other words, when you come to the end of your rope, Jesus understands your experience only too well. He doesn’t belittle us, condemn us, write us off, or turn us away. So, hold on; don’t despair!

But wait just a minute! It says right there that Jesus never sinned. Why is that important? If Jesus had sinned – even one sin – He could not have been our substitute on the cross. If Jesus had personally ever sinned, He could only have died for His own sin. He could not have taken the death penalty for anyone else’s sin upon Himself.

God's standard is perfection. Only a sinless person could act as an acceptable substitute for you and me. Someone here today may be asking, "OK, but how can Jesus really understand me if He never sinned? How can He know the power of temptation I face every day?" Part of the answer is the simple fact that temptation and yielding to temptation are two very different things. Just being tempted isn't a sin! Jesus can identify with you and me in the sense that He was fully exposed to temptation not because he gave into it and committed sins like you and me.

Here's another truth to consider today. Jesus faced a level of temptation we never will. How's that possible? Each and every one of us here today has given into temptation many times. We're sinners. Jesus never sinned. Think of it in terms of physical pain. Pain can get worse and worse until you pass out. When it gets to a certain level, you just lose consciousness and black out. There are levels of pain, therefore, you can't experience. It's kind of the same with temptation. We've all felt powerfully tempted at times, but only Jesus has ever felt its full power. He never gave in to it! Jesus was tempted just like we have been tempted. But do you realize today that no one has ever been tempted to the same extent as Jesus? No one!

Was Jesus tempted to be arrogant? Greedy? Was Jesus tempted to despise people of other races? Was Jesus tempted sexually? Was Jesus tempted to be selfish? To seek power and prestige? To lie, to cheat, or to steal? To hate and despise others? Was Jesus tempted to become anxious, discouraged, or to give up hope? Of course, He was! Isn't that what happened to Him in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before His crucifixion? Jesus experienced such agony that, apparently, blood vessels burst and mingled with sweat that dripped off His face. Facing the cross brought Jesus to the end of His rope. My friend, Jesus has felt every irresistible pull, every suffocating pressure, and every wicked desire you have ever felt. He's experienced desperate fear and overwhelming anxiety. If anyone can identify with you and me when we come to the end of our rope, that person is Jesus. So, hold on to Jesus all the more!

A story is told about a Jewish rabbi who was renowned for his spirituality. One day, one of his young disciples exclaimed in a burst of feeling, "My master, I love you!" The old rabbi looked up from his books and asked the young man, "Do you know what hurts me, son?" The young man was puzzled. He stuttered, "I don't understand your question, Rabbi. I'm telling you how much you mean to me, but I'm confused by your question. It seems irrelevant." The old rabbi replied, "My question is neither confusing nor irrelevant. If you don't know what hurts me, how can you truly love me?" Jesus knows what hurts you and me. In a very real sense, He has experienced a level of hurt you and I never will. That's one reason we know He loves us. Hold on to Him!

God does indeed understand what life is like. He's lived it in the person of His Son, Jesus. His attitude toward you and me is always and eternally compassionate. The Bible says, "The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.... He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities." (Ps. 103:8, 10 NIV) That doesn't mean He excuses sin in your life or mine, but He never stops offering compassion. The Bible says, "Because of the LORD's great

love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” (Lam. 3:22-23 NIV) Some of us are just more naturally compassionate than others; that true. But none of us can ever say that our compassion has never failed or that it’s new and fresh every morning. God can. “So then, since we have a great High Priest who has entered heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to what we believe.” (Heb. 4:14 NLT) A very tired woman boarded a train carrying a very heavy basket. After sitting down, she kept her heavy burden in her arms tightly. A fellow passenger turned to her and stated the obvious, “Put your burden down, Madam. The train will carry both you and it.” When you’re at the end of your rope, remember to hold on to God even more firmly than before. God does know and He does understand. Here’s another great truth from these three verses. It’s about getting the help you need when you’re at the end of your rope.

YOUR HIGH PRIEST INTERCEDES FOR YOU.

What did a high priest do? What was his primary responsibility? In the Old Testament, the high priest was the people’s most important representative before God. He was a mediator, a “go-between.” In the Old Testament, animals were killed as an act of worship. God allowed the Jewish people to transfer the guilt of their sin to an innocent animal and then the animal was killed to pay the penalty for their sin. Once a year, the high priest had a unique role on what was called the Day of Atonement. On that day, a perfect lamb – not even one physical imperfection - was slaughtered for the sins of Jewish people as a whole. The high priest on that same day took some of the lamb’s blood into the temple and sprinkled it on something called the Ark of the Covenant. The ark was a golden box that symbolized the presence and power of Almighty God.

Jesus did the very same thing, but in a far greater and far more effective way. Later on in Hebrews we read, “So Christ has now become the High Priest over all the good things that have come. He has entered that greater, more perfect Tabernacle in heaven, which was not made by human hands and is not part of this created world. With his own blood—not the blood of goats and calves—he entered the Most Holy Place once for all time and secured our redemption forever.” (Heb. 9:11-12 NLT) The Jewish high priest presented the blood of a perfect lamb to God once a year as a sacrifice. God graciously accepted the life of an innocent lamb as payment for the sins of the people. But it was all meant to be a temporary arrangement that pointed to Jesus ultimately. On the cross, Jesus - the perfect Lamb of God - presented His own blood to God as a sacrifice. It was presented once and for all time. It wasn’t necessary to repeat it yearly. God graciously accepted Jesus’ sacrifice as payment for the sins of all who put their trust in Jesus. Jesus is the perfect Lamb of God. He’s also the High Priest who represents us before God. All those Jewish high priests leading up to Jesus simply pointed to who Jesus was and what Jesus was going to accomplish. So, the author of Hebrews is asking his fellow Jewish Christians - defeated, despairing, and at the end of their ropes – do you want the symbolic or the real? Do you want imperfect high priests when you already have the perfect High Priest?

President Obama will leave office this Friday. I was interested to learn that during his eight years in office, he specifically requested ten letters to read every night. That sounds like a lot until you realize that the President – any President - gets tens of thousands of letters, parcels, and emails every day. When you send a letter to the President of the United States, it first passes through the Office of Presidential Correspondence. Many people who write the President a letter start with phrases like, "I know no one will read this." But someone does read all those letters. Someone like Fiona Reeves, Director of Presidential Correspondence at the White House. She and a group of 45 staffers, 35 interns, and 300 rotating volunteers read thousands of letters sent to the President. But before all those get to Ms. Reeves and her staff, the Secret Service opens and inspects all of them. Then it's up to the staff, interns, and volunteers to figure out which ones to pass up the chain to Reeves, who personally reads around 300 per day. After she chooses the ten letters for the President, she hands them off to someone who scans them, who then passes them to the person who puts together the President's nightly briefing book. Whew! *Aren't you grateful that reaching your Heavenly Father – the God of the Universe - is so much less complicated?*

How many of you believe that God is spiritually available to you right now? What allowed you to be or to come into the presence of God today? In the past, Jesus paid the debt of your sin. But, right now in the present, Jesus continues to intercede for you and me before His Father. "So then, since we have a great High Priest who has entered heaven..." (Heb. 4:14 NLT) Present tense! The Bible also says, "Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us." (Rom. 8:34 NIV) Right now. Present tense. As a result, there's never a time when you're not welcome to come into God's presence. Of course, we don't deserve to be there. We can't ever earn or merit the right to be there. But we can be there and stay there because Jesus continually intercedes as our representative before His Father.

That's why you and I can be in God's presence today. But how should we come into His presence this morning? With what kind of attitude? "So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most." (Heb. 4:16 NLT) But how should we come? Boldly. Confidently. Confidence in ourselves? Of course not! Confidence in Jesus – who He is and what He did for us. We'll never be worthy in and of ourselves, but Jesus is worthy to represent us before His Father. So come before God boldly. Approach Him confidently. Especially when you're at the end of your rope. Especially when you're in a world of hurt and need help. It has nothing to do with being arrogant, brash, or demanding. It has everything to do with trusting fully in who Jesus is, what He did, and what He continues to do as your representative. Because of Jesus, you're always welcome to come before God. Because of Jesus, you can always ask God for anything. Because of Jesus, you always know that no matter what you face in life – even when you find yourself at the end of your rope – God is for you and is working everything out for His glory and your ultimate good. When you're at the end of your rope, that's a truth you can hold on to and live out.

What will you and I find at God's gracious throne? "So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most." (Heb. 4:16 NLT) I've always loved these definitions. Mercy is not getting what you deserve. Has God been merciful to you? At the very least, each us deserve eternal damnation, but our merciful God says, "I refuse to give them what they deserve." Grace is getting what you don't deserve. Do you deserve to have your sins forgiven? To have the Holy Spirit living in you? Have you somehow merited the privilege of being involved in God's mission to make disciples of Jesus in some way? Have you earned eternal life? Our gracious God says, "I will gladly give them what they don't deserve." When does God give His mercy and grace? When we need it most. When we're at the end of our rope. When all seems lost. When we're broken and busted. Get help. Get help for your own sake. Get help for God's sake.

Where is God's throne, by the way? "In Heaven," you say. But where's Heaven? It's a real place, but we don't know where it is. Heaven isn't a realm of time or space as we know it. The Bible tells us that Jesus lives both in Heaven and, also, in the spirit of His followers. In one sense, then, if Jesus lives in your spirit, you then have a piece of Heaven within you. As a result, God's throne of grace isn't way out there somewhere a million miles away in the infinity of the universe. It's right here. It's in you. It's in me. Wherever Jesus is present, God's throne of grace is available. If you're a follower of Jesus at the end of your rope today, remember mercy and grace can be found within you because Jesus is already there. Get help. Get help for your own sake. Get help for God's sake. Come before God boldly. Approach Him confidently.

In the 1800s, Nicolo Paganini, a supremely gifted violinist, could put on quite a show. One night he was playing a difficult piece of music before a packed house. A conductor and full orchestra surrounded and supported him musically. Suddenly one string on his violin snapped and hung down uselessly from his instrument. Beads of perspiration popped out on Paganini's forehead. He frowned, but continued to play improvising beautifully. A second string broke. Shortly thereafter a third string broke. Paganini completed the difficult piece of music on the one remaining string. When he was done, the audience jumped to its feet and filled the hall with shouts: "Bravo! Bravo!" As the applause died down, Paganini asked the people to sit back down. An encore was impossible, wasn't it? Paganini held his violin high for everyone to see and nodded to the conductor. Turning back to the crowd, with a twinkle in his eye, he smiled and shouted, "Paganini... and one string!" He put that single-stringed violin beneath his chin confidently and played the final piece on one string as both the audience and the conductor shook their heads in amazement. "Paganini... and one string!"

That's confidence. It occurs to me that all of us depend on a great number of strings to play the music of our lives. But sometimes those strings break, don't they? We find ourselves at the end of our rope. We're down to one string. I remind you that there is one rope – one string that will never break. It's the one that ties you – connects you – to the Lord Jesus Christ. Hold on to Him and get help from Him. Because of Him, live your life boldly and confidently. "Jesus... and one string!" You have a High Priest who identifies with you. You have a High Priest who intercedes for you.