

Before the Throne of Grace  
Heb 4:14-16

**Text (ESV):** Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. 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.

I. Introduction

- A. Quarantined at home, I have been reading and re-reading the books I have on my shelf. I picked up a book that one of my college professors wrote on Emily Dickinson. In one section of the book he discussed Emily Dickinson's view of prayer and he cites a couple of her poems.<sup>1</sup>

1. **Poem #437**

*Prayer is the little implement  
Through which Men reach  
Where Presence—is denied them.  
They fling their Speech*

*By means of it—in God's Ear—  
If then He hear—  
This sums the Apparatus  
Comprised in Prayer—*

2. **Poem #376 (first stanza)**

*Of Course—I prayed—  
And did God Care?  
He cared as much as on the Air  
A Bird—had stamped her foot—*

- B. What the poems are saying about prayer, according to Dickinson:

1. In the first poem Dickinson sees prayer as an implement through which men try to reach God, but our presence is denied. It is as if we are flinging our prayers before a deaf ear.
2. In the second poem she says she prayed, but God did not care any more about her prayers than the air cares if a bird stomps its foot on it. It has no effect. It means nothing. It is a futile gesture.<sup>2</sup>

- C. Now I don't think Dickinson's view is solely hers alone. I think most of us at one time or another have wondered about our prayers and if they make it to God or just fall back down from the ceiling. Of course we pray, but does God really hear us? Do our prayers have any effect in our life or in the world?

- II. Well, Dickinson's poems are not the only thing I have been reading. I picked up Milton's epic poem, Paradise Lost, and read it as well. It is a great book that we have all heard about, probably know something of the story, but unless you were a lit major, you probably have not read it. It was written in 1667 and has a lot of words

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<sup>1</sup> Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief, Roger Lundin p. 146ff

<sup>2</sup> ibid

that allude to things that are not common to our century. (Imagine if Milton popped up in our day and heard us talking about cell phones, jet planes, coronavirus.... He would think the same of our conversation.)<sup>3</sup>

A. *Paradise Lost* is fiction. Milton writes this poem in order to “justify the ways of God to men” (Book I line 26). This is a question that a lot of people want to know the answer to in light of this coronavirus. How is God justified in allowing such a pandemic? How can God be considered just if he allows sin and evil in the world?

1. I am not going to get into any great depth on that aspect of the poem today. I would love for us to read and study the poem at some time and see what Milton has to say. He gives us a wonderful answer. We will see a snippet of that answer today. It is not our focus. I want to focus on the subject of our biblical text in Hebrews 4 – our confidence before the throne of grace.
2. To that end let’s look at the part of the poem after Adam and Eve sinned and how they dealt with their sin. The focus here will be on prayer, where Milton borrows extensively from the book of Hebrews.

B. You know the story. Eve was tempted by Satan to eat from the tree. She did. And she gave some to Adam to eat. And he ate.

1. The scene shifts to heaven where God is seated and the hosts of heaven surround him. God then asks who he should send to judge them. (X 55) And says the only one that he can send is his Son who will **bring mercy along with his justice.**
2. And so the Son descends to the Garden where he finds Adam and Eve hiding. (X 90).
3. And here is how he found them:  
*Love was not in their looks, either to God  
Or to each other, but apparent guilt,  
And shame, and perturbation, and despair,  
Anger, and obstinacy, and hate, and guile.*
4. Adam and Eve who had been in a perfect relationship with God and each other were changed by the sin they introduced into the world – and changed by the knowledge now of evil.
5. When approached by the Son, Adam blames God for giving him Eve. Eve blames the serpent. And the Son pronounces his just sentence on Adam and Eve, with mercy.
6. Skipping ahead a little, Adam is reflecting on the sentence of death.
  - a. He wonders if this is the end of this glorious world (X 720)
  - b. He wonders why God made him. He did not ask to be made.
  - c. And he comes to the conclusion that God is just in his sentence upon his sin.
  - d. And then he asks why God is delaying in his sentence of death. (X 770)  
*...why delays  
His hand to execute what his Decree*

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<sup>3</sup> If you are sitting at home and looking for something to read you can get this online for free and read it with the aid of Dartmouth [https://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading\\_room/pl/book\\_1/text.shtml](https://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/pl/book_1/text.shtml) Click on the underlined words and it gives you the meaning.

*Fixed on this day? Why do I overlive,  
Why am I mocked with death, and lengthened out  
To deathless pain?*

7. And as he wonders these things, Eve sees him stretched out on the ground lamenting. She approaches him.
- C. CS Lewis says in Mere Christianity "*Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive ... And then, to mention the subject at all is to be greeted with howls of anger.*"<sup>4</sup>
  1. That anger is pretty much the way Adam responded to Eve (X 867)- *Out of my sight, thou Serpent, that name best Befits thee with him leagued, thy self as false And hateful;*  
He tells her to go away. He says that she is Satan's partner. A liar. And hateful.
  2. And then: (X 888) *O why did God,  
Creator wise, that peopled highest Heaven  
With Spirits Masculine, create at last  
This novelty on Earth, this fair defect  
Of Nature, and not fill the World at once  
With Men as Angels without Feminine*  
He is wondering here why God made women. He calls them a novelty and an attractive defect of nature. And asks why God did not just make men and devise another way to fill the earth. (I think we can laugh here)
  3. You can see he is angry with Eve. He finds fault with God. He blames God and Eve for the sentence of death. And all of this with Eve right there.
- D. (X 915) But Eve with tears flowing fell humble and asked Adam to forgive her. Then, she asks for the short time they have left for them, if they can live in peace. She confesses her sin against God and Adam. And she asks that the entire sentence for the sin be allowed to fall on her alone.
- E. (X 937) As she wept there before Adam – unwilling to move away until she found peace – Adam's heart relented. He lost all his anger and spoke peaceful words to her. He calls her his sole delight and says that if it was possible he would have all the punishment for their sin fall on his head.
- F. (X 1000) They have forgiven each other and then turn to the Lord. Eve is in despair as she considers their death. But Adam had better hopes. He remembers the sentence Christ placed upon Eve had a promise. Her seed would bruise the head of the serpent. There is hope. Adam says,  
*Remember with what mild  
And gracious temper he both heard and judged  
Without wrath or reviling; we expected  
Immediate dissolution, which we thought  
Was meant by Death that day,*  
He remembered how Jesus' judgment upon them was a gracious temper. They expected death that day. But death has not come upon them.
- G. So they decide there is nothing better for them to do than go to the Lord in prayer. They decide to go back to the place where the sin occurred and pray.

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<sup>4</sup> Book 3 Christian Behavior chapter 7 on Forgiveness

*Repairing where he judged them prostrate fell  
Before him reverent, and both confessed  
Humbly their faults, and pardon begged, with tears  
Watering the ground, and with their sighs the Air  
Frequenting, sent from hearts contrite, in sign  
Of sorrow unfeigned, and humiliation meek.*

- III. Milton now takes us into heaven. (Book XI).(Try reading this from punctuation mark to punctuation mark as opposed to line by line)

*To Heav'n their prayers  
Flew up, nor missed the way, by envious winds  
Blown vagabond or frustrate: in they passed  
Dimensionless through Heavenly doors; then clad  
With incense, where the Golden Altar fumed,  
By their great Intercessor, came in sight  
Before the Fathers Throne: Them the glad Son  
Presenting, thus to intercede began.  
See Father, what first fruits on Earth are sprung  
From thy implanted Grace in Man, these Sighs  
And Prayers, which in this Golden Censer, mixt  
With Incense, I thy Priest before thee bring,  
...Now therefore bend thine ear  
To supplication, hear his sighs though mute;  
Unskilful with what words to pray, let me  
Interpret for him, me his Advocate  
And propitiation, all his works on me  
Good or not good ingraft. My Merit those  
Shall perfect, and for these my Death shall pay.*

- A. What happens when we who know Christ pray? Milton gives us a beautiful picture. Our prayers fly to heaven. They are not blown off course. Their way there is not frustrated. They go straight through heavens doors.
1. And once there – they are clothed with incense – a sweet aroma – and **gladly** brought by Jesus to the Father's throne.
  2. From there Jesus, God's appointed priest, begins to pray for them. (Heb 1:3; 2:17-18; 4:14-16)
  3. And while the words of Adam and Eve were unskilled – they did not really even know how to pray - Jesus, their advocate interprets their words to the Father.
  4. He speaks on their behalf, and at the same time is the propitiation (atonement) for their sins. And while both Adam and Eve said let the punishment for their sin fall on them, here Jesus asks the Father to let them all fall on him. His work will perfect them and his death will pay for them.
- B. The Father responds
- All thy request for Man, accepted Son,  
Obtain, all thy request was my Decree*
1. Jesus' request for their forgiveness was accepted. All along, it was God's decree. It was his plan. It is so sure, Milton assigns the acceptance only 2 lines. That is all it takes. God the Father accepts his Son's request that the Father's will be

- done. **Micah 7:18** –God did not stay angry with his people forever. He delights in mercy (NIV); he delights in steadfast love (NAS). He has appointed his Son our priest so that his mercy and justice can be seen.
2. The answer as to why God allows evil in the world is in part seen here. As I read the poem up to this point, and then read how our prayers enter into heaven and then the Father’s response – it led me to give thanks and praise to the Lord for the way he has forgiven me. Milton paints a picture of the amazing justice of God in dealing with our sin mixed so perfectly with his mercy.
  3. Adam is going to say later on after he is shown God’s plan of salvation in Christ how God receives so much glory as he turns the evil of sin to reveal his marvelous grace and justice. (XII 469) And that is in part why God allows evil in the world.
- IV. My focus this morning is on the confidence we have when we draw near to the throne of grace.
- A. We have all been stuck in our homes now for a couple of weeks.
    1. NPR had an article April 1<sup>st</sup> – “Don't Nag Your Husband During Lockdown, Malaysia's Government Advises Women”.<sup>5</sup> The article goes on to instruct the wives to dress up, put on makeup and don’t ask your husband to help with the chores. While we may chuckle at the audacity of that, the Malaysian government realizes that being cooped up can put a strain on people. This was their suggestion on how to deal with the strain.
    2. And apparently the strain on couples is real. The NY Post had an article “*Coronavirus is making couples sick — of each other: Lawyers see divorces surge*”<sup>6</sup>
  - B. Milton’s poem is a beautiful and powerful presentation of a couple, Adam and Eve, who sinned and are out of sorts with the world, God and each other. But through humility, remembering the promises of God, and prayer experience God’s redeeming and transforming grace.
  - C. We have been cooped up for a while now and that kind of thing can cause strains – personal strains between husband and wife; parent child; financial; and just the strain of being tired of all of this.
    1. Dickinson leads us to believe that she may have prayed. But she did not think it did any good. It was nothing more than wasted words.
    2. Milton presents a far different picture. It is of Adam and Eve who humbly (and by God’s grace (book XI line 1-3)) confessed their sin and forgave one another and remembered God’s promises. He then showed us how our prayers fly right into heaven where the Son perfects them and presents them to the Father who delights to hear his Son bring those prayers before his throne of grace. And there before the throne of grace we see the Father’s eternal decree being fulfilled through the prayers. The forgiveness the Father decreed in eternity is granted.
  - D. Now which was it? Dickinson’s? Or Milton’s? Oh, we know the answer to that. We go to church. I am asking for more than an answer. The real question is

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/01/825051317/dont-nag-your-husband-during-lock-down-malaysias-government-advises-women>

<sup>6</sup> <https://nypost.com/2020/04/03/sick-of-you-lawyers-see-coronavirus-divorce-uptick/>

how do we know – what assurance do we have that our answer is real and not just a hopeful fantasy; a man-made implement or apparatus that does nothing?

- E. Today is Easter. It is the day in which we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord.<sup>7</sup> And it is His resurrection that assures us that our prayers are heard and ushered before the throne of grace where they have their eternally decreed purpose accepted and acted upon by God the Father.
1. And that throne is not only one of grace. It is also one of power.
  2. If this coronavirus has us out of sorts with each other and the world; if it is putting a strain on us financially; or creating a fear inside of us or any other number of things...
  3. Then we have the wonderful privilege and assurance of knowing that we can draw near to God's powerful and Almighty throne and find grace to help in our time of need. Our prayers reach his throne. The resurrected Jesus gladly presents them and intercedes for us.

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<sup>7</sup> Last week's lesson led us to the conclusion that the resurrection is the reasonable thing to believe. And if we are Christians it is far more than reasonable. He has regenerated us; redeemed us; changed us and given us a hope which we have experienced and know.