

HEBREWS 4:14-16 – STAY ON TARGET

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For some strange reason, one of the most memorable lines for me from the original Star Wars movie—for you aficionados, Star Wars: A New Hope—is the line: “Stay on target. Stay on target.” It comes near the end of the movie when the Rebel Alliance has begun their assault on the Death Star. Three X-Wing fighter planes are barreling down a narrow trench in the exoskeleton of the Death Star with three enemy Tie-Fighters in hot pursuit—one of which is piloted by the number two bad guy himself, Darth Vader.

Two of the X-wing pilots are getting panicky, and for good reason. Having begun their approach to the Death Star’s only weakness, their life-expectancy has dropped precipitously. They’re getting shot at from in front and then from behind. They’re flying as fast as they can along this precariously constricted path only to fire their weapons at what would be a small target even if they were stationary. Their adrenaline is pumping. Their fight-or-flight instincts are screaming “RUN!” And it doesn’t help their cause that we haven’t met these actors nor heard their names before now.

Then there’s the squadron leader. “Stay on target. Stay on target,” he responds to them in an intense and sober voice. He is of one mind, one purpose. His focus is solely on the target. Seemingly unshakeable and almost oblivious to his peril and to his comrades’ fear, he is fully committed to the goal—hitting the target—and resigned to whatever consequences may befall him as a result of his mission. Unfortunately for him, he too is not a main character, so one can quickly surmise what fate is destined for him.

As I studied this morning’s passage in the book of Hebrews, I felt like the writer was saying over and over again, “Stay on target.” It’s a message that is prolific in Scripture. Listen to Moses talking to the nation of Israel:

“If you should say in your heart, ‘These nations are greater than I; how can I dispossess them?’ you shall not be afraid of them; you shall well remember what the Lord your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt: the great trials which your eyes saw and the signs and the wonders and the mighty hand and the outstretched arm by which the Lord your God brought you out. So shall the Lord your God do to all the peoples of whom you are afraid.” (Deut 7:17-19)

Don’t be afraid. Remember. Stay on target.

Listen to God talking to Joshua:

“Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go.” (Jos 1:7)

Don’t stray. Stay on target.

Listen to Paul to the Corinthians:

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it.” (1 Cor 9:24)

Don’t give up. Stay on target.

Listen to Jesus to His disciples:

“Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)

Trouble’s coming, but don’t worry. I win. Stay on target.

The reason the message of staying on target is so abundant is that no generation, no individual has developed an immunity to distraction and deviation. Take for example the Israelites. Fresh off of seeing the ten plagues of Egypt and the destruction of the Egyptian army, the Israelites worship not Yahweh, their deliverer, but a golden calf. Forget staying on target.

Take the twelve disciples. Feeding 5000, walking on water, healing the sick, making the lame walk—they saw Jesus do it all. But when Jesus is arrested, ten of the twelve flee and hide in fear. When asked, Peter flat out denies he had any relationship with Jesus. Kiss the target goodbye.

But before we get all self-righteous and prideful, let's be honest. We've all had times where we were tempted to get off target, times where we thought we knew better than God, times where following God seemed too hard, and it would be easier not to follow Him, times where we did, in fact, get off target.

This morning, we are going to look at another passage about staying on target. Open your Bibles to Hebrews, chapter 4. While you're doing that, let me give you some background for what we're about to read.

The author of Hebrews is anyone's guess. Early church tradition argues for Paul, Barnabas, Luke, or Clement of Rome. Modern scholarship has proposed Apollos, Silvanus, the deacon Philip, Priscilla and/or Aquila, Jude, and Aristion.¹

What is known is that the author wrote with a mastery of Greek. His vocab and his grammar surpass Paul's.² He was steeped in Hellenistic Judaism with a robust knowledge of the Jewish priesthood and sacrifices.³

Nonetheless, the author is extremely familiar with his audience. He exhorts them as one of their own:

“Therefore *we* must pay much closer attention to what *we* have heard, lest *we* drift away from it” (Heb 2:1)

—another ‘stay on target’ message.

The audience is fluent in the language of Hellenistic Judaism too and thus is likely a predominantly Jewish house church of Christ followers.⁴ The writer's letter frequently incorporates images, references, and terms drawn from the Greek version of the Old Testament which will need some discussion for us, gentiles, to appreciate. This house church though is

¹ W. L. Lane, “Hebrews,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

shrinking (Heb 10:25), and they're "losing the confidence of their convictions."⁵ In other words, they are struggling to stay on target.

Let's read Hebrews 4 starting in verse 14:

Therefore since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. (NET)

The writer begins, "Therefore..." He's about to make his case for staying the course based off the statement he just made:

And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. (Heb 4:13, ESV)

The whole bit about being naked, exposed, and giving an account sounds familiar, doesn't it? Think about Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. Remember what happened after they ate from the tree they weren't supposed to? They had knowledge of good and evil and realized they were naked. They were ashamed of their nakedness, so they covered themselves in fig leaves. Then God came. Adam and Eve—knowing they had sinned by disobeying God—did what any of us would have done. They hid. They were afraid of what he might do. And God said, "Adam, where are you?" Adam, give an account.

"Now, Karl, what does that have to do with this 'staying on target' business?" you ask. Well, I'll tell you. This call in Hebrews to stay on target begins with the readers understanding their need, and with us understanding ours. Fundamentally, Adam and Eve, the original readers of Hebrews, you and I—we all have the same problem, a sin problem. We need someone to make us right with God. We can't do it ourselves. Adam and Eve's fig leaves were inadequate. So too are our efforts to do enough good, to pray enough, to avoid certain sins, to attend enough church. We need to stay the course because judgment's coming and we're in desperate need for a means to survive it.

⁵ Ibid.

The writer of Hebrews sees the need clearly, and he knows the solution. We all need someone to stand in the gap, to intercede on our behalf, and to make us right with God—a high priest. Because the concept of a high priest is foreign to us, we need to get a history lesson.

The high priest was the highest ranking mediator in the religious hierarchy between Yahweh and Israel. He was installed with a 7-day ceremony of anointing and sacrifices and adorned with special clothing. The high priest was called to a higher level of purity. He could not touch the dead, not even to bury his parents. He could only marry an Israelite virgin. Any sin the high priest committed brought guilt upon the whole nation and warranted special sacrifices. While other priests could perform the regular sacrifices and rituals, only the high priest could deal with the sins of the nation on the annual Day of Atonement. As a foreshadowing, the high priest's death served as an atoning sacrifice. Israelites found guilty of involuntary manslaughter were confined to one of the cities of refuge. When the high priest died, those who were convicted were freed from their incarceration.

So the author is saying we need a high priest, one that will make an atoning sacrifice for us, for our sins. Now jump back to Genesis 3 for a second. Remember what happened right before God kicked them out of the garden? God clothed Adam and Eve garments of skin. A pattern was inaugurated there. Adam and Eve had sinned, and they needed to be made right with God. The penalty for treason against Yahweh, the Sovereign over all creation, is death. Something had to die in place of Adam and Eve for them to go on living. That something was whatever animal whose skins were used to cover Adam and Eve. And someone had to make that sacrifice of atonement for Adam and Eve's sin. Someone had to slaughter the animal. In their case, that someone was God Himself. He served as their priest, as the one making a sacrifice on their behalf.

Now back to Hebrews... The writer is saying: "Because we're gonna be found naked, exposed, and called to give an account and because we have a high priest who's gonna stand in the gap for us and make atonement for us, stay on target."

Still, this isn't your usual high priest. The writer adds three details to make this a compelling cause for staying on target. First, he says we have a 'great' high priest. Our high priest is superior to the other high priests. And that's not 'great' in the sense of "he's just so great and wonderful," but 'great' as in 'mighty' or 'powerful'.⁶ Our high priest is no impotent religious figurehead, he can get the atonement job done.

The second description is that our high priest "has passed through the heavens." Off hand, that's an odd saying. But since the writer of Hebrews is making the case for the greatness of our high priest, then it's reasonable to assume that he's making a comparison to other high priests. That being the case, let's look at the proximity the high priests had to God.

The high priests of the order of Aaron were only allowed into the earthly dwelling place of God, the Holy of Holies, just once a year on the Day of Atonement. That's it. Compare that to a high priest who has unrestricted, direct access 24-7 to the throne of God in heaven. Who do you want interceding for you?

Your high priest who's got your back is constantly and intimately connected to God.

The third description is that their high priest is "Jesus, the Son of God." I don't want to move too quickly past this one. We naturally think of Jesus as the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity. We have "God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit" etched in our minds. All of this is well and good, but it misses the nuance here. This is the first time the writer uses the phrase "Son of God" to describe Jesus, which begs the question, "Why now?"

One commentator answered the question this way:

"Although the Sonship of Jesus is assumed in the preceding part of the epistle, the title *Son of God* is not used until this point in the discussion, and it is no doubt intentionally

⁶ Walter Grundmann, "μέγας, μεγαλειῶν, μεγαλειότης, μεγαλοπρεπής, μεγαλύνω, μεγαλωσύνη, μέγεθος," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic ed., vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 529.

introduced here to combine the humanity and divinity of Jesus as the perfect qualifications for a high priest who was to be superior to all others.”⁷

In other words, who better to be humanity’s priest than God Himself.

We have a superior, mighty high priest with unfettered access to God, who is God Himself, interceding on our behalf. So stay on target.

The last part of verse 14 tells us how the original readers’ aim was drifting: “Let us hold fast to our confession.” They were tempted to give up. More than likely, the pressure, especially from Rome, was turning up the heat on these Christians. They were probably thinking back to earlier, easier times as Jews. At least then the other Jews didn’t hate ‘em. “Why can’t we just go back to the way things were with the sacrifices and the temple and the high priests?”

But the writer here says, “hold fast,” stay on target. The Greek verb used there means ‘cling to’, “as if it requires some determination on our part.”⁸ Holding fast is not a passive instruction. It takes work and energy, and frankly that effort is even harder to muster when the alternatives look more attractive. Nonetheless the writer says, “let us hold fast our confession.” Don’t back down from what you believe. Don’t punt just because the pressure’s on. Stay on target.

Let’s continue on. Verse 15:

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. (Heb 4:15, ESV)

Have you ever encountered some supposedly spiritual person who, when you tried to interact with him or her, found them distant and disconnected from the world like it was beneath them.

I think it’s all too common, especially for church leaders, to develop and promote this super-spiritual aura about them. It’s as if they are untouched, unaffected by temptations faced by

⁷ Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 15 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 125.

⁸ Ibid.

mere mortals. It's a form of pride that arises out of image management and a concern for what people think of them. They've got to look and act like they've got it all together, like sin is no longer an issue for them. Say goodbye to authenticity. After all, how can people follow someone who isn't perfect, who doesn't have a spotless record?

Austin Ridge Bible Church, I want to take a moment and brag on you. As a church, you've committed to being real people with real lives and real problems. From this stage I'm standing on, we've seen men, women, leaders, and even pastors share their struggles—adultery, pornography, abortions, drugs, alcohol, workaholics, perfectionists, control freaks, divorce, gossip, suicide attempts, anger, greed, manslaughter, egotism and pride. I want to give you props for having the faith, humility, and courage to be authentic. Together, we've said no to façades; no to trying to look like something we're not, that is perfect people.

Well the temptation to look perfect is not unique to contemporary religious leaders. The Pharisees of the first century put on a big show to demonstrate their super-spirituality. Jesus tells a story depicting this tendency among the Pharisees in Luke 18:

“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’” (Luke 18:10-12, ESV)

The Pharisee's expression of spirituality was a lie. The Pharisee certainly had more knowledge about God than the tax collector. He knew the commands about fasting and tithing to the point that he could brag about exceeding them. But truly knowing God does one thing really well. It shows you just how far short you fall and how much grace you need. Jesus' story from Luke 18 continues:

“But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 18:13-14)

Knowing *about* God all too often puffs people up. “I've got the right theology” or “I've gone to the right church or seminary” or “I read the right authors.”

Knowing God brings humility. “God, I’m a mess. I need you, and I need grace.”

So the writer of Hebrews says we don’t have a high priest who’s distant and can’t relate. On the contrary, our high priest gets us. The writer goes on to say that this high priest has been tempted in every respect as we are. He has been in our shoes.

The first temptation ever recorded in the Bible dates back to Genesis. Satan offers Adam and Eve the opportunity of a lifetime: to be like God.

[The Serpent] said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” (Gen 3:1b-5, ESV)

“Just disobey God on this one little overly restrictive, unreasonable command, and it will be yours.” And just like you and I would, they took the bait.

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. (Gen 3:6, ESV)

Fast forward to Jesus’ time in the desert after his baptism.

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” (Matt 4:8-9, ESV)

Satan’s at it again. “Jesus, I’ll make you God-like. You’ll rule and be exalted. You just have to fudge on one little command, and it’s yours.”

These two stories involve temptations of commission. The opportunity was there for a deliberate rebellion against a clear command issued by God. What about temptations of omission—opportunities to do right or good, but you don’t do it. You know what I’m talking about? Like the time where you looked in a coworker’s eyes and saw hurt, but you were exhausted and didn’t want to deal with someone else’s baggage. Or the time when a homeless man asked you for food, and you dismissed him as you walked into a restaurant. Or the time when the church needed money to launch a new ministry, and you wanted a bigger television. Or

the time when you felt prompted to share Jesus with a friend, but didn't want to risk what that might cost your relationship.

I struggle on a regular basis with omission: opportunities to do right and good that I just let pass by. Look at Jesus though. God had a plan for him, but it was going to cost. It would be scary. It would be lonely. It would be excruciatingly painful. Yet it was the opportunity of a lifetime to do right and good. Listen to Jesus' words on the eve of his crucifixion:

And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, [Jesus] began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me." And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me..." (Matt 26:37-39, ESV)

"Father, this is not my idea of a good plan! Are you sure about this? Is there any other way?"

The writer of Hebrews doesn't stop with the idea that he's been in our shoes. Yes, our high priest has seen it all. He gets us. He can sympathize. However he faced off against temptation and remained unscathed by sin. He rebuked Satan, using the words of God himself. He said:

"Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." (Matt 26:39, ESV)

He endured assault and insult from his enemies, abandonment by his friends, suffering, torture, and ultimately death. He took the worst that this world could offer, and yet he remained loyal, obedient, and true to the Father and did not sin. No blemish on his record. No deviating from God's ways. He stayed on target.

Moreover, all the other high priests that had preceded Him, each had to offer sacrifices for their own sin before they could offer them for others. This high priest doesn't. He has no sin to atone for. There is nothing keeping him from God. Nothing.

Consider what one author wrote: "Sometimes we assume that those who have fallen into a particular sin are best able to understand and help others, after repentance, of course. But

Scripture suggests that those who have known the full force of a particular temptation and yet stood firm are the best counselors, if they retain the humility which comes from grace.”⁹

Think about that for a second. If you were building a football team who would you want for a coach? The man who led a team to the Super Bowl and lost? Or the man who led a team to the Super Bowl and won? Both men have faced the greatest adversity and challenge in professional football. Both men understand the pressure, the demands, the intensity. But one walked away victorious, with the knowledge of what it takes to win. The other walked away only knowing how to lose, how to succumb. All else being equal, who would you choose?

Our high priest looked temptation in the eye and beat it! Stay on target because the one we follow, our spiritual leader, our high priest, knows how to win, conquering sin and death.

Ok, enough of the pep talk to stay on target. Now let’s look at how to stay on target. Hebrews 4:16 reads:

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.

The writer encourages us to draw near to God, but he doesn’t say ‘God’. Instead he says ‘the throne of grace’. Talking about thrones conjures up ideas of royalty, sovereignty, and kings. We are to draw near to our King, the One with all power, the One to whom one day every knee will bow.

Beware, though, that approaching a king is a dangerous proposition. In Esther’s day, entering the king’s presence uninvited could quickly cut short your life. If he didn’t want to see you or didn’t want to hear what you had to say, then approaching his throne would be the last thing you ever did.

Kings were administrators of justice and judgment, blessings and curses, and were not to be taken lightly. But this King’s throne is one of grace, of compassion, of unmerited favor. The writer doesn’t say “a throne of judgment” or “of wrath”. This King to whom we Christians

⁹ Philip H. Hacking, *Opening Up Hebrews* (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2006), 30.

profess loyalty is a king who loves us and shows us mercy. Hence, the writer says to draw near with confidence.

The word there for confidence was often used in Greek discussing politics, having three shades of meaning. First, it had to do with the right to say anything.¹⁰ Second, it had to do with the right to tell the truth.¹¹ Third, it emphasized the courage of openness and candor in the face of those opposed to revealing the truth.¹² It became a sense of completely lacking restraint or restriction, even shamelessness, to the point of resisting any tendency towards hiding and concealment.¹³

So when the writer says he wants us to approach with confidence, he wants you and I to approach God fearlessly. He wants full disclosure of ourselves to God. He wants us to talk to God in specifics, not vague generalities. He wants us to be real and genuine in our prayers. He wants a no-holds-barred confession. We are not to be overwhelmed by and retreat from the awesomeness of our God. Instead we are to be captivated and compelled by his freely dispensing of favor.¹⁴

Lastly, the writer says that the result of drawing near with confidence is mercy and grace to help in time of need. The original audience's need was to stay on target, to hold fast to their faith, their beliefs, their confession. They needed to stay on course, even under pressure, and not revert to Judaism. They needed forgiveness of entertaining thoughts of abandoning God, and for any steps they may have taken in that direction. They needed strength, courage, and favor to persevere.

¹⁰ Heinrich Schlier, “παρρησία, παρρησιάζομαι,” in Kittel, 5:872.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid, 5:873.

¹³ Ibid, 5:872-3.

¹⁴ Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 127.

You and I, we too need mercy and grace. When my daughter was dying of congestive heart failure at 6 days old because of a birth defect, I had a choice. I could ditch God because I thought He was unfair or I could run to Him for mercy and grace. I could strike out on my own because I thought God was not trustworthy, or I could cling to Him for provision. By grace, I clung to Him.

I was reading the Gospel of John to Peyton those days in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, and when I read these verses, I broke down in tears:

As [Jesus] passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. (John 9:1-3, ESV)

My daughter wasn’t born broken by mistake, she wasn’t dying arbitrarily. God had a purpose to be worked out through her, either in her life or her death. Talk about grace: to see such a painful tragedy through the eyes of God and know that whatever happens would not be in vain.

Then the day came for Peyton’s open-heart surgery. I thought surely she was going to die. And that morning I had the choice again: to cling and stay on target, or to run and forget about following Christ. I was reminded of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They stood before a furious tyrant who was threatening their execution because they wouldn’t worship his God. The threesome boldly stood their ground, stayed on target, and said their God could save them, and here’s the kicker:

“But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.” (Dan 3:18, NIV)

But even if he does not. Even if God didn’t save my child, would I still worship Him alone? Let me share a portion of my prayer that I wrote that morning, running to the throne of grace:

I ask, Lord, that you would heal Peyton, but if you choose to take Rayna and I down a different road, may you be glorified all the more. I choose to cling to you, and I know you are the good shepherd, providing shelter and rest in the storm. You know where you

are going and the journey you want to lead me on, so please give me the courage to continue taking one step at a time.

Everyone in this room needs to run to the throne of grace. We need favor and mercy in whatever may tempt us to stray from our target, whether it's personal tragedy, lusting thoughts, wanting a promotion or new car or a larger house, or desiring an escape from persecution. We need forgiveness, restoration, strength, and courage. So let me ask everyone to stand, and I'm going to pray for us.

Our sovereign King, we hear your call to stay on target, to hold fast to what we believe. What we believe is what you have revealed in your word. What we believe is that we serve, worship, follow, and obey Jesus, our crucified and resurrected savior, our high priest who has unfettered access to you day and night, your Son. We confess together that all too often we'd rather punt on those beliefs when it looks easier, more attractive, and more convenient to aim in another direction. Anchor us, center us, straighten us—whatever it takes—so that we may stay on target and remain true, loyal, and devoted to You, your glory, and your kingdom. Lord, we run to you, knowing that you are the source for grace and mercy, favor and love. Prompt us to turn to you when we feel the pull and desire to go astray. We pray as our High Priest taught us to pray:

Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. (Matt 6:9b-13, NAS)

I pray this in the name of Son and in the power of the Spirit. Amen.

If you're feeling the tug of something changing your aim, moving your target, and want to pray with someone, I invite you to walk over to the prayer room located just outside the doors there in the back. We've got a team of people eager to pray. They're not there to fix you, just to lift you up as you approach the throne of grace.

Have a great week!

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