## Hebrews 4:12-16 "Resources for Entering God's Rest"—part two<u>∗∗</u>

Main Idea: God not only offers us His rest, but He graciously has provided two resources for entering His rest. We learn about these resources in Hebrews 4:12-16. In this message we'll be zeroing in on the second resource.

- I. Resource #1: We have His Word (12-13).
- II. Resource #2: We have a High Priest (14-16).
  - A. We can trust Him because of who He is (14).
    - 1. He is great.
    - 2. He went through the heavens.
      - a. He went where sinners cannot go.
      - b. He went where God is.
    - 3. He is both God and man.
    - 4. He deserves our absolute allegiance.
      - a. To be saved you must make a public profession.
      - b. If you are saved, you will hold on to that profession.
      - c. You will hold it because He is holding you.
  - B. We can trust Him because of what He experienced (15).
    - 1. He identified with our weakness.
    - 2. He was tempted just like we are.
    - 3. He never sinned.
    - 4. He understands what we feel.
  - C. We can trust Him because of what He offers (16).
    - 1. He gives us access to the throne.
    - 2. He gives us confidence.
    - 3. He gives us mercy and grace.
    - 4. He gives us what we need at the right time.

The Bottom Line: Because there is a High Priest...

- 1. We can experience God's rest today.
- 2. We can anticipate God's rest forever and ever.

How do you help people who are struggling? Let me narrow the focus of that question. How do you help people who *profess to believe in Christ* who are struggling? The fact is, everyone struggles at times, including those of us who publicly identify ourselves as believers in Jesus Christ.

In November 2007 Billy Graham wrote a letter thanking friends for their prayer support following the loss of his wife, Ruth, who went to be with the Lord on June 14 of 2007. In his own words, "Ruth was the greatest Christian I have known, and her deep faith was a constant anchor for me. After 64 years of marriage, my heart is full of gratitude to God for His comfort and grace in helping me through these days." Then he shared this anecdote, "Years ago, Ruth noticed a highway sign and told us she wanted that sign as her epitaph. If you visit her burial place today in Charlotte, you will find the words of the sign etched on her marker stone, 'End of construction. Thank you for your patience."

That's good. The Christian life is like a construction project. There's work involved, a task to be accomplished. This work involves a process called *progressive sanctification* in which we as believers must consistently "put off" old patterns of desires, thoughts, and behavior, and "put on" new patterns of desires, thoughts, and behavior (to use Ephesians 4:22-24 terminology). God's agenda is to use all things in our lives to accomplish His purpose of transforming us into the likeness of His Son, Jesus Christ (to use the language of Romans 8:28-29).

But sometimes the construction site gets pretty messy. I remember once while working on a framing crew, coming to our construction site in the morning and noticing that the roof tresses we had set in place the previous day had *blown over* and looked like a stack of fallen dominoes. When you see a sight like that, you just want to go home! Sometimes you feel that way in the Christian life, too.

So our question again... How do you help professing Christians who are struggling, perhaps struggling to the point that they want to turn around and go home? There are many components to the answer (that's why we have *twenty-one* New Testament epistles, each containing practical counsel for dealing with challenges in the Christian life). But in each of those letters you'll find a common starting place. Professing Christians who are struggling need many things, but none more basic than this, and if it's missing they will indeed throw in the towel and go home.

They need the reminder that if you have Christ, you *have what it takes* to make it to the end of the construction project. That's because God has not left His people deficient in any way. If we have Christ, we have what it takes, and if we have what it takes we need to stop looking for something else.

In the first century there were a group of people, Jewish by background, who had professed faith in Christ. However, when persecution hit they started looking over their shoulders and contemplated going back, thus reneging on their promise to Christ. God graciously gave them a letter—we call it the epistle to the Hebrews—to encourage these folks to persevere.

In the first three chapters the author reminded his readers that Christ is superior. He's the Son of God, the Creator and sustainer of the universe, and as such is superior to the angels (chs. 1-2). He's also superior to Moses (ch. 3). The point is, if you have the *best* why would you go back to something less?

I can think of a reason, one I hear from time to time. "I just don't have what it takes. This Christian life thing may work for others, but I guess I'm not the Christian type." To set the record straight, there is no such thing as "the Christian type," unless by "the Christian" type you mean helpless sinners, because those are the kind of people that God has chosen and intends to transform into His Son's likeness!

Here's what's needed. It's the very subject the writer of Hebrews addresses at the end of chapter four. We who are struggling need to identify and use the *resources* God has provided for us.

Notice the charge in verse 11, "Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience." I'm not sure I can do that, some will say. I want to enter God's rest, but maybe I don't have what it takes.

I've got some good news for you. God not only offers us His rest, but He graciously has provided two resources

for entering His rest. We learn about these resources in verses 12-16. Last time we investigated the first resource, and in this message, after a brief review, we'll be zeroing in on the second resource.

#### I. Resource #1: We have His Word (12-13).

Verse 12—"For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."

God's Word is an amazing resource, as verse 12 indicates. It's alive, powerful, precise, and penetrating. It exposes the truth about our hearts (as we saw last time the Bible gives us categories for making sense of the struggle and deals with both *fruit sins* and *root sins*).

What's more, God's Word prepares us for the coming day of judgment, as verse 13 declares, "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account." If you want to enter God's rest you can, but you must utilize the wonderful resource He has provided for you in His Word. You must be in His Word consistently, and under His Word corporately.

But there's more! In verses 14-16 we learn about a second resource...

### II. Resource #2: We have a High Priest (14-16).

As I mentioned a moment ago, the first readers of this epistle were Jewish Christians who, because of persecution, were contemplating going back to their former beliefs and practices. One criticism they heard from their Jewish brethren, no doubt, was, "You've abandoned the temple rituals God gave us centuries ago, and that means you no longer have a high priest to represent you before God! Don't be a fool! Come back!"[2]

But we *do* have a high priest, says the writer of Hebrews. In fact, the priesthood of Christ will be a key theme throughout the rest of the book of Hebrews. And right here, in verses 14-16, the writer gives three reasons why we can trust our High Priest.

**A.** We can trust Him because of who He is (14). "Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess."

Most of us don't appreciate this fully because we don't understand what a priest is, but the first readers did. A priest is a God-authorized individual who has legitimate access to God's presence and who enters God's presence in order to do something in behalf of those who could not otherwise enter God's presence. Simply put, a priest is a gobetween, a person who represents others before God. Under the Mosaic law people brought their sacrifices to a priest so that the priest might offer those sacrifices in their behalf to God.

If for fourteen centuries your people had been approaching God *through a priest*, you would have great difficulty abandoning that understanding. If you had learned that God is holy, as the Jews had rightly learned, and that sinners can't meander into His presence, you would be inclined to find a priest to represent you before God. That's what makes verse 14 so significant. We *have* a high priest, says the writer. And three things are true of Him.

- 1. He is great. The Greek word is mega. We have a mega-priest.
- 2. He went through the heavens. Notice the text doesn't say He merely went "to heaven," but that our high priest has gone "through the heavens." That raises two questions. One, why is the word plural, 'heavens'? And two, what does it mean to go "through the heavens?" Let's tackle these questions one at a time.

First of all, it's not uncommon in the Old Testament for the word 'heaven' to be plural.[3] So that could be why it's

plural here. But my sense is the writer has a more specific intent. It's helpful to note that the Bible mentions three heavens. There's the atmospheric heaven that surrounds the earth (Deut. 11:11), the first heaven. Then there is the realm of the sun, moon, and stars (Gen. 1:14), the second heaven. And then there is the third heaven, referred to as 'paradise,' the realm where God dwells (Isa. 63:15; 2 Cor 12:2-4). This verse says that our high priest has gone through *the heavens*, that is, right into the very presence of God.

And what about that word "through"? Why does it say our high priest went *through* the heavens? It's worth noting that in the tabernacle and temple, there likewise were three areas: the outer court, the Holy Place, and the Holy of Holies. No one could enter the Holy of Holies except the Jewish high priest, and he could enter it only once a year on the Day of Atonement. On that day the high priest would go in to the Holy of Holies, sprinkle blood on the mercy seat, and then come back out. See the pattern? In and out, in and out, year after year, over and over, in and out, in and out. The high priest couldn't stay because he was sinner. And the high priest kept coming back year after year because God's people were sinners. [4]

But we have a different kind of high priest, a superior one! Jesus Christ can do far more for His people than any other priest can do, and here's why, for two reasons.

- **a.** He went where sinners cannot go. Right through the heavens, and...
- **b.** He went where God is. And what's more, He stayed there! Ephesians 4:10 says, "He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe."

Do you remember what happened to Nadab and Abihu? These two sons of Aaron were ordained as priests in Leviticus 8. They began their ministry in Leviticus 9. Then at the beginning of Leviticus 10 they took their censers and put fire in them to burn incense, but they used *unauthorized* fire. Consequently, fire came out from the LORD's presence in the tabernacle and consumed them! Israel received a valuable reminder that day. You do not approach the Living God on *your* terms, but on *His* terms.

What makes our high priest different from all other priests? This does...

- 3. He is both God and man. Verse 14 identifies Him as "Jesus the Son of God." In the book of Hebrews our high priest is called "Jesus" about a dozen times and "Christ" about a dozen times. The writer wants us to know that our Savior is both God and man. Here he calls him "Jesus" (emphasizing His humanity) and "the Son of God" (emphasizing His deity).
- 4. He deserves our absolute allegiance. Notice the since/then connection in verse 14, "Since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, [then] let us hold firmly to the faith we profess." Since we have a great high priest, then we ought to "hold firmly" [the verb kratomen means 'to grab, to seize, to keep; it's used also in 10:23, 'Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess']. Hold firmly to what? The NIV says, "to the faith we profess." In the Greek it simply says, "Hold fast the profession."

We learn some vital truths about salvation here. I'll mention three.

a. To be saved you must make a public profession. To become a Christian you must do something with your mouth. Romans 10:9 says, "That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Hebrews 3:1 refers to Jesus as "the high priest whom we confess." Hebrews 4:14 says we are to hold on to "the profession" (homologias means 'to say the same thing'; translated 'confess' in 1 John 1:9). In order to become a Christian you must say the same thing about Jesus that countless others have said and that God Himself says, that He is the Savior and Lord, that He died for sinners like you, conquered the grave on the third day, returned to heaven, and now offers forgiveness and eternal life to all who will trust fully in Him.

And if you really believe in Him, you won't hide it. According to God's Word, you'll make your faith known by making a public profession. That profession begins at baptism—that's what baptism is in the New Testament, God's intended means for making a public profession of one's belief in and submission to the person of His Son, Jesus

# Christ.

I said that our public profession *begins* at baptism. It certainly doesn't end there. Which brings us to a second vital truth...

**b.** If you are saved, you will hold on to that profession. "Let us *hold firmly to the faith we profess*," says the writer. Hebrews was written to people who had already professed faith in Jesus, but now they are urged to hold to that profession. And those who truly know Christ *will* hold to that profession. Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me (John 10:27)."

What shall we conclude about the person who does *not* hold fast to their profession? Hebrews will have much to say about such a one, particularly in chapter six. Does such a person lose his salvation? No, salvation is of the Lord (Jonah 2:9), is a work that God accomplishes by grace (Eph. 2:8), and is work that God perseveres to accomplish (John 10:28-29). No, no truly saved person will ever lose their salvation. But not all who *profess* Christ truly *possess* Christ.

To make it personal, if you are saved you will not only make a public profession but you will also hold on to that profession. That means that Jesus won't merely be a fire insurance policy in your hip pocket. What you proclaimed publicly at your baptism will continue to be your profession throughout your life. I believe in Jesus! He is my Savior and the Master of my life. He is my hope in death and my treasure in life. That is my profession!

You say, "But how can I hold on to that profession? I'm too weak!" The answer is...

c. You will hold it because He is holding you. I love the word picture Jesus uses in John 10:28-29. Here's what He says about His sheep, "I give them eternal life [note that eternal life is His gift to us], and they shall never perish [note His promise of eternal security]; no one can snatch them out of my hand [note there is no possibility that He will lose one of His sheep, not one]. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand [note the double protection for God's people; both the Father and the Son are holding them in their hands]."

I'll say it again. You become a Christian simply by believing in Christ. But if you have truly believed in Christ you will want to make that faith public, through baptism and then throughout your life. You will give evidence that you are a Christian by holding to your profession, and you will hold it because He is holding you. If you ever stop holding your profession, it reveals He wasn't holding you, and He wasn't holding you because you weren't one of His sheep to begin with.

Why can we trust our high priest? First of all, we can trust Him because of who He is. Secondly...

**B.** We can trust Him because of what He experienced (15). "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin."

Here we learn something amazing about our high priest. Yes, He is *great* and He has *gone through the heavens*, but He's not distant and far removed. Indeed, He who is the greatest being in the universe has actually experienced what we experience. We're told four things about Him in verse 15.

1. He identified with our weakness. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness." That's putting it negatively. It's telling us what we do not have. We do not have a distant, unsympathetic high priest. What do we have? We have a high priest who has the ability to sympathize. The word "sympathize" is the Greek sympatheo and literally means "to suffer along with."

To Greek thinking people in the first century, this was unthinkable. The Stoics, for instance, said that the primary attribute of God was *apatheia*, which meant he had the inability to feel anything at all. Barclay explains, "They argued that if a person could feel sorrow or joy it means that some other person was able to influence him. If so, that other person must, at least for that moment, be greater than he. No one, therefore, must be able in any sense to affect God

for that would be to make him greater than God; and so God had to be completely beyond all feeling."[5]

Answer this. What does our high priest have the ability to suffer along with and sympathize with? Our *weaknesses*. Do you have any weaknesses? Do you ever feel weak and vulnerable? Then this is especially for you! We have a high priest who identified with our weakness.

That's because God actually became a man. It's called the doctrine of incarnation. God took upon Himself human flesh. He felt hunger. He got tired. He made Himself vulnerable to the attack of wicked men. And because of this, because He identified with our weakness, He is able to sympathize with us. Hebrews 5:2 takes it a step further, stating, "He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness."

2. He was tempted just like we are. "We have one who has been tempted in every way just as we are." Does this mean that Jesus experienced every single temptation possible?

For instance, think of the spouse who loses her mate. Months pass, and she grows weary. This lonely widow feels the intense temptation to grow bitter at God for taking her mate. Did Jesus experience that particular temptation? He was never married, nor did He ever lose a spouse, did He?

Think about the teenager who struggles with internet pornography. Did Jesus face that specific temptation? They didn't have internet in the first century.

So what is this verse saying? The Greek text simply states that He was tempted "according to all" (*kata panta*) and "in like manner" (*kath homoiotes*). 1 John 2:16 indicates there are three basic categories of temptation [KJV]: "For all that *is* in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world." Note the three categories: the "lust of the flesh," "the lust of the eyes," and "the pride of life." Those categories transcend cultures and time periods. There's *the lust of the flesh*—that covers everything from premarital sex to the lure of internet porn, to the temptation to overeat. Then there's *the lust of the eyes*—that covers coveting your neighbor's house or car or job because you're not satisfied with what God has given you. Then there's *the pride of life*—the lure to look good in the eyes of man, wanting your name to be recognized, wanting your own way.

Jesus experienced each of those. In fact, remember His wilderness temptation? Matthew 4 says that after fasting forty days, Jesus was approached by the devil who threw three temptations at Him: the first, *turn these stones into bread* (the lust of the flesh), the second, *throw yourself down off of the temple peak* and see if God's angels rescue you (the lust of the eyes, living for the hear and now), and the third, *bow down and worship me and I'll give you the kingdoms of the world* (the pride of life).

Know this, beloved, the next time you face temptation. Remember that our high priest was tempted in the very same way. How did He respond?

- 3. He never sinned. "Just as we are—yet was without sin." This is mind-stretching to ponder. He was *like us* yet He was *not like us*. Listen to how various translations render this statement...
  - NLT: "for he faced all of the same temptations we do, yet he did not sin"
  - NRSB: "but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin."
  - Young's Literal: "but one tempted in all things in like manner—apart from sin."
  - ESV: "but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin."

We have a sinless high priest. He was without sin. Indeed, He had to be sinless in order to accomplish what He accomplished. Hebrews 7:26 declares, "Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens." 2 Corinthians 5:21 states, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us..."

You might be thinking, "But Christ is God. He's all powerful, and that means that temptation didn't affect Him like it does mortals like us, doesn't it?" That's a valid question. Since Christ is God and since He was 'free from the bias of sin' (as Guthrie puts it; p. 123), can He really identify with us? Was His temptation *real*?

We actually wrestled with that concern back in chapter two, and I shared the following illustration. I asked you to think of two men trying to lift a heavy object. Who better understands how heavy the object is, the man who tries to lift but can't budge the object, or the man who heaves it over his head, holds it there for the count, and then returns it to the ground? If a man can't lift two hundred pounds he'll never appreciate fully the weight of *four hundred pounds* hoisted over his head, will he?

When a person says, "Well, the fact that Jesus never sinned means He doesn't understand how bad temptation can become," it's simply not true. It's the other way around. We are the ones who don't know how bad temptation can become because we give in before it reaches its greatest intensity which He didn't. Barclay offers this explanation:

"The fact that Jesus was without sin means that he knew depths and tensions and assaults of temptation which we never can know. So far from his battle being easier it was immeasurably harder. Why? For this reason—we fall to temptation long before the tempter has put out the whole of his power. We never know temptation at its fiercest because we fall long before that stage is reached. But Jesus was tempted far beyond we are; for in his case the tempter put everything he possessed into the assault. Think of this in terms of pain. There is a degree of pain which the human frame can stand—and when that degree is passed a person loses consciousness so that there are agonies of pain he can not know. It is so with temptation. We collapse in face of temptation; but Jesus went to our limit of temptation and far beyond it and still did not collapse. It is true to say that he was tempted in all things as we are; but it is also true to say that no one was tempted as he." [6]

All that would indicate fourthly...

4. He understands what we feel. This is so comforting to know. Our high priest has experienced the powerful lure of temptation, so consequently He who knows all things by virtue of His omniscience knows what we feel by experience.

Think about what He experienced during His life. At the age of twelve He was misunderstood by His earthly parents, and He who was indeed a perfect child must have felt tempted to say, "I don't need you to raise me." But He didn't. He submitted Himself to those parents in obedience to the fifth commandment.

As an adult He knew intense hunger, and was tempted to satisfy that legitimate need in ways His Father didn't authorize. He spent sleepless nights and when bone-tired felt the lure to substitute His Father's plan for some "time for me." On multiple occasions He who was perfect was gossiped against and wrongfully slandered by self-seeking critics, and felt the lure to make those critics pay. In Gethsemane He experienced intense emotional agony, and felt the temptation to avoid God's plan for His life. At His court trial He experienced blatant injustice and the violation of His rights, and felt the temptation to retaliate. He was hit on the head by soldiers and felt the temptation to hit back. On the cross He experienced the pain of being forsaken and utterly alone, and felt the temptation to call upon thousands of angels to come to His aid.

I was there when my wife gave birth to our two daughters. I watched the miracle happen twice and both times felt a great sense of appreciation for what my wife endured. I remember seeing the monitor in Blodgett Hospital in Grand Rapids, Michigan as it was indicating when the next contraction would hit Sherry, and I remember her saying to me, "Do something!"

Yes, I was right there. I saw my wife carry and bring into the world our two children. But I've never experienced what I saw. I never felt what Sherry felt. As hard as I tried I did not know what she was going through. I could not sympathize fully with her weakness.

But with us our high priest can and does! O beloved, listen to what He experienced so that He might become our sympathetic high priest...

Isaiah 53:3-6 "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

Think again of the first readers of Hebrews. Some were considering leaving the church, abandoning their profession in Christ, and taking the easy way out. Did Christ ever face that temptation? Indeed! Hear the mockers at His cross, "If you are the Son of God come down from your cross (Matt 27:40ff)!" He had a choice to make: leave the cross and in so doing leave His suffering, *or* remain on the cross and in so doing remain faithful to His Father's will.

Christ's whole life was full of such decisions. "I must do the will of Him who sent me," was His choice over and over.

What temptations are you experiencing? He understands, brothers and sisters. Yet there's another reason we can trust Him, not only because of who He is and what He experienced, but...

C. We can trust Him because of what He offers (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."

Here is His threefold offer.

1. He gives us access to the throne. He who has gone through the heavens and right into the presence of God offers to us access to that highest place. To the throne, says the text. A throne is where a king sits. A throne in heaven represents where the highest king of the universe sits. Let us approach that throne, is the invitation.

Have you ever been in a store, arrived at the checkout, proceeded to pay, only to discover you didn't have any money on you? How'd you feel? Like crawling under the carpet and slithering out of the store?

That's exactly how we *could* feel when we approach God with a request. There we are before the Owner of the universe and we have absolutely *nothing* we can give Him, for two reasons. One, He already owns everything, and two, as sinners we are bankrupt before Him. On what basis then can we approach Him? On the basis that He calls His throne *the throne of grace*.

Grace is God's unmerited favor and help. That's what this throne is, my friend. It's the place where people who have nothing to offer God find help. And the reason He offers us help is because of the high priest who is there representing us.

- 2. He gives us confidence. Let us approach the throne with confidence, says our text. Do you realize how revolutionary this reality is? For fourteen centuries only one person per year could enter God's Holy of Holies, just one. But when Christ died, something happened, something so significant that God actually tore in two from top to bottom the curtain-barrier that barred entrance into the Holy of Holies. Now all who trust in Christ can approach God and do so boldly!
- 3. He gives us mercy and grace. "So that we may receive mercy and find grace to help." Whether you realize it or not, those are your two biggest needs in life, for God's mercy and grace. "God, please don't treat me as I deserve!" That's a request for mercy. And, "God, please give me what I need yet don't deserve!" That's a request for grace.

And why would God extend to us such a marvelous offer? It's all because of the One who is there on that throne. When a sinner approaches God trusting fully in the High Priest, Jesus the Christ, God offers that sinner unmerited pardon and unmerited help for Jesus' sake. And one more thing about this offer...

4. He gives us what we need at the right time. "In our time of need," the text concludes. God's help is so timely and that's because God's timing is perfect!

Remember the subject at hand. The writer of Hebrews has been talking about the offer of God's rest. He's shown us that we have two wonderful resources for attaining God's rest, His Word and His High Priest.

### The Bottom Line: Because there is a High Priest...

- 1. We can experience God's rest today. Are you struggling? Then approach His throne.
- 2. We can anticipate God's rest forever and ever. And forever we will praise Him
- \*\*Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.
- Letter from Billy Graham, November 2007.
- [2] For instance, see Acts 21:28.
- [3] Donald Guthrie, p. 120.
- [4] Observation by Robert Gromacki, p. 82.
- [5] Barclay, p. 42.
- [6] William Barclay, p. 42.