

Anchored to Christ

By Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson

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Bible Text: Hebrews 6:13-20

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First Presbyterian Church

1324 Marion St
Columbia, SC 29201

Website: www.firstprescolumbia.org

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/fpccolumbia

Our Scripture reading this evening is from the letter to the Hebrews chapter six and we are going to read there verse 13 through to the end of the chapter in verse 20. And you will find the passage in the pew Bible on page 1004 and it will be very helpful to you, I think to have a copy of the Bible, either the pew Bible from the rack in front of you or you own Bible open before you as we think together about this Word of the Lord.

So let us hear God's Word, Hebrews chapter six verse 13 through verse 20, page 1004.

For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, "Surely I will bless you and multiply you." And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.¹

And now as we turn to God's Word together, let us turn to the Lord of the Word and seek his blessing as we give ourselves to its study.

Our heavenly Father, we thank you, again, tonight that you are a speaking God and that you have made us as your image in order that we might be recipients of your revelation, that we might gasp in wonder at the way in which you have made yourself known in the created order in the heavens and the earth and that we might gasp with awe and faith and joy as we hear your Word in the pages of sacred Scripture. We thank you with all our hearts for this book, for the ways in which you have used it down through the ages to point your people to yourself, for all that it has meant for us as your children, for the way

¹ Hebrews 6:13-20.

in which it has been light to illumine us in our spiritual darkness, the way in which it has come to encourage us in our discouragements and at times in our great loneliness, the ways in which it has challenged us and redirected us and recalibrated us so that we might live according to your promises and for your glory. And as we turn to it again at the beginning of this year and as on this evening we seek with joy to give ourselves afresh to you as you covenant people and your covenanted children, we pray that you would speak to us through your Word and that you would make the book live to us through your Holy Spirit. And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Of all the letters in the New Testament, what we know as the letter to the Hebrews is, in many ways, the one that is most like a sermon. I have no doubt that some of the things the apostle Paul says in his letters he may have sneaked in here or there in one of his many sermons. But the letter to the Hebrews, if, indeed, it is a letter, describes itself not so much as an epistle written by an apostle, as a word of exhortation a word of encouragement written by a pastor. It has 13 chapters and the author of those chapters regards that as a very brief word of encouragement as he tells us in chapter 13.

So though this is a book that in many ways is alien to many Christians because it takes us into the world of the Old Testament, into the world of the high priesthood and the temple, it is very helpful for us to understand it is written by a Christian pastor in order to bring challenge and encouragement to his people.

If there is anything I think I have learned about the gospel ministry and not least about preaching as a pastor, is that there is nothing in life that stretches your emotions and affections quite so much. Most of us are hard wired either to be gentle or to be rough. But if you are going to be a gospel pastor and preach God's Word, you actually have to learn to be both. We would like balance in the Christian life to be like pastor {?} ship quietly sitting there in a calm sea readily anchored. But apparently that is not the gospel way with sinners. The gospel way with sinners is to engage in radical surgery upon our lives and then bring radical healing to our lives. And so balance in the Christian life, balance in the life of the Church, balance in the ministry of the Word that is brought to us by pastors like the anonymous author of Hebrews, doesn't take us down the center aisle so much as stretches us to side aisles.

And so there are times when the Word of God, as our forefathers used to say, rips up our consciences. And there are times when the Word of God pours a healing balm into our souls and by God's grace often those different times turn out to be the same time.

But most of us are hard wired in one direction or another. As a preacher of the gospel I would far rather speak 1000 words of comfort than 10 words that would rip up your conscience. And, perhaps, as a hearer of the gospel you would far rather hear 1000 words that brought you comfort than 10 words that ripped up your conscience. But faithfulness to the gospel—and this is the challenge of it and if one speaks freely about these things, the reason why so many of us as gospel ministers actually fail abysmally the challenge of the gospel—is that we do both. And the challenge of hearing the gospel is that we respond appropriately to both.

And actually there is probably no better illustration of this than in the letter to the Hebrews. The letter to the Hebrews is punctuated by occasions when the author is ripping up the conscience of these Christians, giving to them some of the most dire warnings outside of the teaching of Jesus. And then there are passages of the greatest and sweetest comfort in which he points us to Christ and all the riches of God for us in Jesus Christ.

That is why he calls his letter a word of παρακλησις (par-ak'-lay-sis). And even if you don't know any Greek, you probably would guess that is the word that is related to the title Jesus gives to the Holy Spirit, the paraclete. And when he describes what the paraclete does it is precisely this. Jesus says, "When he comes he will rip up the consciences and he will convict men of sin and righteousness and judgment." And yet the same Lord Jesus as he expounds the work of the paraclete tells us of the marvelous comfort and consolation he will bring to us as he shines his perfect light on the face of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

And the fascinating thing about Hebrews chapter six which many of you, I am sure, have studied in the past, is that this is one of the chapters in which he does both. The opening section he is ripping up the conscience. He is saying to them, "I want to speak to you about the high priestly ministry of Jesus Christ and the problem is you should have become able to teach this by now. But you are spiritual infants. You are able to take only milk and not solid food." And so he warns them about the possibility of all kinds of great spiritual experiences that do not mean you are a real Christian. And so when we come, for example, to the end of verse six and he is speaking about land that bears thorns and thistles that is worthless and near to being cursed and in the end is to be burned, we are reeling back and wondering if we can take anymore. And then he comes in with the word of comfort and encouragement. He says, "Now that you are down where you need to be, saying to the Lord, 'Lord, I am weak and needy and I, too, am in desperate need of you to hold on to me,'" then that is the place where he can bring Christ in, isn't it? And say, "Now, my friends, that you are ready for this, you are hungry for this, you see your need for this. Now," he says, "You will be able to appreciate and understand the riches of the gospel of God's grace."

And this is what he does so marvelously in these verses that follow. And the significance of that for this evening as we recommit ourselves to the Lord in taking this covenant on our lips is, as all of us who have done it before, this is a covenant calculated to make you tremble. What you commit yourself to in this covenant as a Christian believer is just being a Christian, but just being a Christian means that for the sake of the Lord Jesus, as we will soon see, we are prepared to be laid aside for him or employed for him, full for him, empty for him and to his pleasure we give our whole lives that he may dispose of them as he will. And what makes us tremble is that some of us took this covenant last year or the year before and we have found these words come profoundly true in our lives. We have been laid aside for him. We thank God that we have learned from biblical teaching that for him we may be laid aside. But it is very painful. Or we may have suffered loss for him.

And so when we have yielded ourselves in this way and we come to do it again there is something in us that trembles and says, “Lord, what will it be this year? In what ways might you employ me this year? I pray that you will, but, Lord, in what ways might you lay me aside for your own glory? In what ways might you fill me? I long that it may be so, but I know there may be ways in which you will empty me down to the deep resources of my being in which I have been so much trusting. And, Lord Jesus, I am prepared for that.”

And, you see, if we are going to be able to take such a covenant it follows, doesn't it, that we need such encouragement as this writer is just about to give us in the second half of Hebrews chapter six. And he does it, I think, in this way. He gives us three very remarkable encouragements to consecration. The first of them is this. He tells us about an immutable, that is an unchangeable, an immutable purpose. Then verse 13 and 14:

For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, “Surely I will bless you and multiply you.”²

He takes us back to the origin of God's great covenant that eventually came to fulfillment in Abraham's seed, our Lord Jesus Christ. And he says, “God made that covenant with Abraham.” It was a great covenant that he made with Abraham.

“Surely, I will bless you and multiply you.”³

But if you run your eye further down to verse 17 you will notice how the author describes this as God's unchangeable, God's immutable purpose. And he is really underlining for these believers, who are actually going through very difficult times that one of our great encouragements in the gospel is that God's purpose is unchangeable. His purpose to keep his promise of blessing to his people in Jesus Christ is an immutable promise. It had, of course, an initial fulfillment in Isaac eventually. And even more eventually it had its fulfillment in the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. We who are the heirs of the promise have seen this promise fulfilled. But that importance of knowing that God has an unchangeable purpose is this. That his purposes don't, in fact, move quickly. And Abraham discovered that, didn't he? It is actually.... it is quite paradoxical that in this passage the author speaks about Abraham's patience, because the one thing you and I think about Abraham is that he didn't have patience. He wanted God to get on with it. And, of course, that is where this resolute commitment of God to fulfill his purposes is such a vital thing for us to grasp, because neither in Abraham's case, nor in the case of the history of redemption, nor, frankly in your case or in my case does God seem to move fast enough in our lives very often.

That is why the word that the author uses here, I think, there are two different words used in the New Testament for patience. The word that he uses here in the case of human

² Hebrews 6:13-14.

³ Hebrews 6:14.

beings conveys the idea of somebody who is able to put up with and see through the frustrations when their own will and desire isn't being fulfilled.

Now I suppose we are like the rest of the citizenship in the United States of America. Most of us are up there in the bracket of the most patient people of all. I don't know how many people easy to me when they have lost the plot, they say, "I am usually a very patient person." I quietly grit my teeth and say to myself, "No, what you mean is you are actually a very impatient person, but you have never been tested far enough for you or the rest of us to discover how impatient you actually are." Now isn't that true? We are all patient when we have no frustrations. But the very essence of patience is that we are able to cope with, bear the burden of and see through frustrations. And here is one of the great paradoxes of God's ways with us. God is determined to be frustrating to you, because unless he is frustrating to you at the end of the day you will begin to confuse your will for your life with God's will for your life. You will think of yourself as a very patient person as long as God does what God is supposed to do in your life. And what God was supposed to do in Abraham's life was give his wife a child. And it was very frustrating for Abraham that God wasn't doing what God was supposed to do.

And so he took his eye off the ball, if I can use a sporting metaphor. American football, you take your eye off the ball and you fall out of the pulpit. That is what you do. You miss the touchdown, because you were far more interested in getting the touchdown than catching the ball. My, that is a metaphor for the Christian life, isn't it? Far more interested in getting the blessing than actually catching the ball that God is throwing into your life in his amazing providence.

So when God who has promised blessing to his people brings challenges into the lives of his people, what words these are to be laid aside for you. Lord, the sheer frustration of this. Why are you not working? Where are we to look in order to be drawn out of that frustration? Well, we are to look to this, that God has pronounced his purpose. He has given his promise of blessing to Abraham through his seed Jesus Christ, to us who are the heirs of that promise and his purpose is absolutely immutable. It is unchangeable. And we can rest our souls on the immutable purpose of God.

The fascinating thing is this. It is just so {?} this man must have been something to have as a minister, I can tell you, that there you are when he has only done nine verses and you are reeling. And now he is saying, "Fix your gaze on God's immutable purpose," and you are fixing your gaze on God's immutable purpose and then he slides along side of you and says, "I am not finished yet. That is just the start." Because you notice how he focuses our gaze not only on God's immutable purpose, but on what we might call an absolutely impossible act.

Now this is rather startling what he says here. He is taking us back to Abraham. And one of the famous verses in the Abraham narrative is Genesis 18:14, isn't it? There is Sarah laughing because she is going not have a baby and she is a century. And the Word of the Lord is there is nothing impossible with God. And if you and I as believers are certain of anything, we are certain of this. There is nothing impossible with god. Well, this author is

here to tell you there are two things that are impossible with God. And he makes it quite clear. He actually says it, that by two things, verse 18:

“...two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie...”⁴

Now this isn't high sophisticated theology that we have to try and work out. He is saying to us as a pastor, “You need to know there are two things that are absolutely impossible for God.” He cannot lie in relationship to his word of promise and he cannot lie in relationship to the oath of his covenant. You notice how he puts it. He says he has given his word of promise.

Beloved, he can't lie. He can't go back on his promise.

Now, of course, you and I can go back on our promises and we often do, don't we? We don't mean to do it usually. But we do it.

“So concerned about you. I will pray for you.”

You know, three days later somebody says, “Thank you so much for praying for me.” And you are covering your face. And you are embarrassed because it slipped out of your mind. You are a fallible human being and you have a fallible memory.

I was reminded by more than one person this morning. I took 10 years off my life in one of the services today and I said it was 2003. Well, some of you are doing well considering the age that you are. You see, we are very forgetful and we stumble and we fall. And so we do something.

You to go court and they want to hear the truth. I don't know what they say in America courts.

“The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”

And they don't fully trust you and so they say you have got to swear an oath here. We want your word and then we want you to swear an oath. And you can do it on the Bible or do it probably today on all kinds of things. But we want you to swear an oath. We want a double security to your testimony. Here is the amazing thing that we find in the narrative of Abraham and this great promise of which we are the ultimate heirs in the blessings that have come to us largely here in this church as Gentiles in our glorious Savior Jesus Christ.

He says, “God's Word is his bond. He never lies. He can't lie. He will never go back on his promise.” But he says, “Here is an amazing thing. God has given his promise and then he has said, ‘And I also am prepared to take an oath’”

Now when you and I take an oath they bring something that they think is bigger than us,

⁴ Hebrews 6:18.

something they think will have authority over us. So in the good old days they would bring the Bible. Why? Because you wouldn't swear your oath with your hand on the Word of God and take it all back, would you? Because this is an expression of the authority of your creator over your life. Here is the amazing thing the author of Hebrews says. He was obviously thrilled to discover this and it is a thrilling thing to discover that he had noticed in Scripture. It is always interesting, isn't it, to notice in Scripture something never... nobody has ever told you is in Scripture. And the author of Hebrews was like that as he read his Bible or memorized his narrative of Abraham. It suddenly dawned on him. This is absolutely startling.

The God who never lies has said, "Even although I never lie, I am going not take an oath on top of this promise and in that oath I will give you a double reassurance. I will never go back on my promise of blessing." And then he answers the question we are all asking or the question he expects we will all be asking. You and I, we put our hands on our Bibles. We believe that this Bible has more authority than we do. We put our hands on the Bible and we say, "Well, I swear by almighty God that this is the truth." But who has God got to swear by? What can he appeal to? He says when we take oaths we always appeal to some greater authority than ourselves. To whom can God appeal?

And then he makes this astonishing statement. He says, "God has sworn by his own existence that he will never fail to keep this promise of blessing not his people. Do you see what that means? That means God says to us I would rather cease to exist than begin to fail my people or to cease to bless them.

And so the author of Hebrews has seen it there in the Genesis story. He swore by himself.

And you remember the dramatic way in which that was impressed on Abraham in Genesis 15 when the darkness came upon him and God had said, "Now, you will understand this in a minute, Abraham, or in a lifetime, perhaps, but I want you to take some animals and I want you to cut them in pieces and I want you to create parallel lines of those animals."

And just think about our sanctuary here and the lights all going out. And I have been at the butcher's and I have got these pieces of animals and I am lining up the middle aisle here and the light goes out. And we are all sitting here wondering what does this mean. And then a light appears and it moves down the center aisle between the pieces of these dismembered animals. Well, what is it saying? It is actually related to the fact that in the Old Testament you usually don't make a covenant. You cut a covenant. And the symbolism of the light, God is light passing down through the center aisle in the midst of the darkness between these dismembered pieces of animal that have been slain is really God symbolically saying, "If I fail to keep my promise of blessing to you, let me be as these dismembered animals."

In two things in which it is impossible for God to lie. Now why does he go to these lengths? Well, look at what he says here in verse 17. This is... what a pastor this fellow

was. So, he says... I mean it is fantastic what this man saw in his Bible. And the even more fantastic thing is that it was there in his Bible. You know, sometimes we preachers say, you know, it is clear in the text here. It is actually not clearly in the text at all here. But he has seen it clearly in the text:

“...so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement.”⁵

He makes his promise. His promise is enough, isn't it? His promise is enough for you. You don't need God to swear oaths as well. But because he desires, it is just absolutely amazing.

So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.⁶

He has done it just for you. He didn't need to do it for himself. He didn't need to do it for the trinity. He didn't need to do it for the angels. He didn't need to do it at all. But, you see the author is... he is seeing something in the narrative here. He is seeing the amazing covenant generosity, kindness, tenderness, commitment, love, care, compassion of this Savior God. It is as though he will go the hundredth mile to reassure us that his promise will never fail. His words will never fall to the ground. His absolute determination to bless you is as sure as his very existence, because he stakes his existence on it and he wants you to know it.

Dear, dear friend, if you are here tonight and you have all kinds of doubts about the way I which God is really committed to you, think about this. He staked his very existence on blessing you if you are his. And in these two things in which it is impossible for God to like he has most marvelously committed himself to his dear children.

So there is an immutable purpose and there is an impossible act. And it leads, of course, in the third place, to this immovable anchor of which he speaks. Here he says... you notice how this comes in. He says:

“...we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope...”⁷

So it looks as though the anchor about which he is speaking is this hope of the gospel to which we hold fast, a hope that enters into the inner place. He is using the language of the Old Testament temple to describe the glories of God's heavenly presence. This anchor enters into the inner place behind the curtain. He is thinking of Jesus as the high priest

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Hebrews 6:17-18.

⁷ Hebrews 6:18-19.

where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

Now what is he saying here? He is saying there is this anchor, as it were, that has been thrown into the very heart of our Savior Jesus Christ. And it is tied to our hearts, too, so that, in a sense, Jesus will either sink or swim with us. But he will never allow the anchor to break. And the glorious thing he says is that we are not anchored on earth. We are anchored in heaven. And we are not just anchored in heaven, we are anchored to one who has gone into the very presence of God and who appears there on our behalf. He is the forerunner and in a sense he is not only steadying us in this world, he is hauling us in to the world that is to come. And that is why he adds this bit that maybe a bit odd to us that he has gone there as a forerunner on our behalf.

And I hope you understand that Jesus did not come from heaven for his own sake. He didn't need to come from heaven for his own sake. And so he has not gone back to heaven for his own sake. He came for our sakes and our salvation. But he has gone back there for our sakes and our salvation. He is there in the inner presence of God and we are anchored to him. And he is never going to let that anchor in any way be destroyed. And he is there in heaven for us as a high priest after the order of Melchizedek. And he goes on to explain what he means by after the order of Melchizedek.

Melchizedek is that fellow who appears in Genesis 14 out of nowhere and he disappears into nowhere and the author of Hebrews, who apparently loves the Abraham story, says that he doesn't seem to belong for it to anybody. He just comes out of eternity and he goes into eternity. And that is just like the Lord Jesus. He has gone into heaven for us and he is there forever as the high priest to whom we are anchored.

And that is why you remember at the end of this great book the author says, "And this Jesus is the same yesterday..." Yesterday when he walked the face of the earth; today, as he is now in the presence of God; and forever. He will never, ever change and he will never fail to be our Savior.

That is why we often like to sing Charity Bancroft's hymn.

Before the throne of God above,
I have a strong and perfect plea,
A great high priest whose name is love,
Who ever lives and pleads for me.
My name is graven on his hands.
My name is written on his heart.
I know that while in heaven he stands,
No tongue can bid me thence depart.

And then this.

When Satan tempts me to despair,

And tells me of the guilt within,
Upward I look and see him there,
Who made an end of all my sin.
Because this sinless Savior died,
My sinful soul is counted free.
For God the just is satisfied,
To look on him and pardon me.

That is why anchored to such a Savior, knowing that you have this anchor of the soul that is immovable, knowing that there are two things that for God are impossible and knowing that his purpose is unchangeable, you can throw yourself into that purpose.

Do you know that marvelous part of George MacDonald's little fantasy story *The Golden Key* when the hero in the piece comes to the old man of the earth and he is looking for blessing. He is looking for the meaning of life. He is looking for security. And we are told by MacDonald the old man of the earth stooped over the floor of the cave and raised a huge stone from it and left it leaning. It disclosed a great hole that went plum down.

"This is the way," he said.

And the hero responds, "But there are no stairs."

And the old man of the sea says, "Yes, you must throw yourself in. There is no other way."

And what Hebrews is saying as we throw ourselves into the future with Jesus Christ is that the arms of God are strong and able, well able to sustain us because he has pledged his very existence to bless us. And that is why in his grace we are able individually and together to make a fresh covenant with him that he will do with us as he pleases.

Our heavenly Father, we pray as you have given us your Word with the strong consolation of its truth, with the assurance that through faith we are anchored to Jesus Christ, we pray that you would give to each of us a gracious sense that you desire that we should be absolutely convinced of the security that you give us through faith in our beloved Savior and that you will work everything together for good for those who love you, are called according to your purpose since you did not spare your own Son, but have given him up on the cross for us all. We believe that you will also with him freely give us all things. Lead us into such assurance and its joy and its stability we pray for Jesus Christ our Savior's sake. Amen.