

We Are in a Strong Position

The Book of Hebrews

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Well, our portion of Scripture tonight is in Hebrews 6 and we're reading verses 9 to 20 as our passage and a title to go with it that's appropriate to where we find ourselves at the moment, encouragement, I trust, and it is this, "We Are in a Strong Position." We are in a strong position. Well, believe it or not as we survey our small numbers this evening, this is what the word of God actually tells us.

Where we were looking the last couple of weeks at the stronger sterner stuff that is in Hebrews 5:11 and into chapter 6, verse 8, are things to hear, testing and proving things. Well, last week's sermon is this passage and we had Hebrews 6:1-8, this most frightening passage in the New Testament, and I offered the thought it probably is and perhaps the second behind it would be Hebrews 10 and many questions to agonize, can we lose our salvation. Is this telling me that I can forego spiritual benefits, that what I appear to have can be taken away from me or I can lose it. We said no but we did say there's such a thing as apostasy and there's such a thing as coming very much under the influence of spiritual things, spiritual truth, and yet not actually being changed by it, temporally changed, something superficial but the heart is not changed, there's something missing and eventually that which is missing comes through and it was shown in the end that they were not for real.

So it was testing and it was something that we all have to try to understand for ourselves and come through, leaves us without excuses that it's not good enough to be near. We have to know that we truly are the Lord's, not good enough to come under the influence of the Scriptures but not actually be changed, to sing hymns and not to believe the reality of the Christ of whom those hymns speak. But our writer, we'll be relieved to hear, has now changed tone and you can see it immediately, can't you, there in verse 9. And we will note the contrast that he's talked about some unspecified group or but there in verse 6, for it is impossible for those who are once enlightened. He's not specific, is he? He's not saying, "You, you were once enlightened. You were once those who tasted the heavenly gift and you once to become partakers of the Holy Spirit. Where are you now? You're in danger. You're in danger of being burned, whose end is that, cursed and burned." But he doesn't say that. In fact, changes, as it were, his audience and the readership he now has in view, he's spoken somewhat by way of digression about those others who doubt this were once among them but now are not.

But he then says, "beloved." Ah, that's a word to hear, isn't it, "But, beloved, we are confident of better things concerning you, yes, things that accompany salvation, though we speak in this manner." This manner, of course, being what was just there in Hebrews 6:1-8, these severe things, these warning things, this giving us a portrait of those who weren't quite believers, not quite converted, therefore all of what they said and how it appeared they might have seemed but they weren't. But he says you're not those. I'm confident of that. You don't belong in that group, amongst those. And here he begins to use you to speak about you, as though dear friends, beloved, this is what I believe about you, I'm confident of better things, things that have actually to do with salvation, that you're part of that, you're in a different category, you're in a different place and I'm confident about you even though I've had to just bring to your attention those more severe and those more worrying things. What a tonic that that must have been to them, to read that and to know that, well, we wonder who the writer of this is and, indeed, we take it as apostolic in terms of its doctrine, that the "we" in that way is of an apostolic kind, that it is talking here and speaking on behalf of what is truth, those who are on the side of truth, that this is from that quarter and is therefore to be believed. That is to be believed over and above anything else and they're to hear it and to be assured that they are beloved, that that is how they are thought of by this apostolic writer and that he can see in them things that accompany salvation.

So we find as we looked earlier that much of the time he's not actually speaking about you. He does now and then but for the most part he hasn't. He's been talking about broader things, describing the failure of apostate Israel in the desert and they're all falling by the wayside. But now he is talking directly to you and saying things that are actually immensely encouraging and that remind them and remind us that we're believers, we're in a strong position. We're in a strong position.

Let's continue. First heading: a backward glance. A backward gland. Well, yes, there is in all of this encouragement, well, he still brings something of what he's just been saying with him so there is a mix of exhortation because he wants to be absolutely sure and he wants them to be absolutely sure that you're not going to become what he's just described, apostasy, and how do we keep ourselves in that narrow way that we were thinking about this morning? How are we sustained in this difficult path? Well, part of it is through the warnings, the warnings of the dangers and the dangers are there and it's as though we see those dangers, we need to be told about them, and we step back. So the other week there and the warning there's a steep drop behind this sign and we're over it and there was, there was a steep drop and, well, that sign is very helpful and we know not to go clamoring over that because there's a steep drop. Useful and it keeps people safe.

So those who might be a bit careless, a bit foolish, that they are kept within safety and that's what the word of God does. We might think, surely we don't need to be told about that, that there's a steep drop there, I wouldn't have tried to go over them anyway. I would have had more sense, I'd like to think. Well, not always, do we, and we can be very careless and very foolish and so the warnings are given. That's part of God's help to his own people, to his sheep, "My sheep hear My voice and they hear the warnings that I

give and they step back." They think, "That's not going to be me. Let that not be me, Lord. Let it not be me, the one who ends up in amongst Hebrews 6:1-8."

So with a little bit of a backward glance, he talks about the need for diligence and that's there in verse 11. It is his desire, "we desire." Yes, it's comforting, isn't it? He's standing with them. This is my longing for you, that each one of you, and he's not missing anybody out, each one of you, he is saying, "show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end." That you'll keep going, that you'll be diligent. Well, that's hard work, isn't it? Hard work, diligent. If somebody is diligent in their work, it means they always turn up on time. It means that they're always busy, always trying to do the best that they can, and always conscientious, they're always willing.

That's what it means and it's meaning that for them, that you will continue in that vein because there's danger otherwise, there's the fact and it's verse 12, "that you do not become sluggish." It's actually the same word as is in Hebrews 5:11 where he says, "of whom we have much to say and hard to explain since you've become dull of hearing," sluggish of hearing, that you've become slow, that you're not listening, not hearing it, you're not applying it, and he says, "We don't want that for you. Don't be that person." And so we just remind you of that, we hold before you that we're confident that with you there are things that accompany salvation but don't stop, don't go backwards, don't stand still, being sluggish, being slow, being reluctant to do what the word of God says or believe what the word of God says, rather believe it and be diligent in all of the duties and in all of the responsibilities that it holds before you and follow through with it.

How do we become sluggish? Well, we can stop praying. That's never a good sign. If we stop praying. Well, sometimes there can be difficult times, can't there, and our intentions collapse about us or we set our hearts to pray and what we find as we do on occasion that our brains are numb, or we're distracted, and we feel so unsatisfied at the end of it, so disappointed, so defeated. We say it's better at least to attempt to pray than not to pray at all, at least you were found there seeking God's face even if at the end of it you felt somewhat disappointed. The Lord does hear even faint petitions and the cries of his feeble followers hearts. But if we stop praying altogether, that is not a good sign. That's getting sluggish. That's drifting. That's getting a little bit near where the steep drop is and not heeding what it gives to us there.

But obedience. It's being obedient as disciples and monitoring how we speak, what we say, the attitudes of our hearts, the kind of people that we are, that we're keeping a watch on that and monitoring when things rise up, murmurings, discontent, lack of faith, when we begin to dispute with the word of God and watching for that and what is this, this isn't good. And having inquiry, having a bit of an inquest into it, needing to ask, "What's going on? Why are you downcast, o my soul? Why are you disquieted within?" And if we're devaluing Christ, well, that is not good. Friends, that is not good. This is where this writer is trying to get us, isn't he, because the people are devaluing Christ. "No," he's saying, "that is not going to give you any kind of full assurance of hope until the end." You won't have full assurance of hope, you'll be full of doubts and fears if Christ is not at the center of your hope and your belief, if he is not the very source of your assurance, that

your confidence and your boldness is in and through him. So if you are devaluing Christ, if you're beginning to think less of him, then that's not a good sign and that is an indication that you need to begin to inquire and need to repent, and you need to come back and recover your first love for him.

So are these people elect? Yes. Are they saved? Yes. Can we lose our salvation? No, but they still need to beware. That's the way that God does, that's why he gives warnings and those warnings are heeded by the wise. Our next heading: God remembers. God remembers. Friends, we're in a strong position and this is surprising and when you read some of the commentaries, they're surprised at this, that the writer could say something like this and it's in verse 10, "For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister." That he is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love. Fascinating. Here is the glorious and holy God who owes us nothing. Really, he owes us damnation. Really, if he was being really just, he would condemn us. That's what justice would say, justice smiles and asks no more when it sees the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so we're in a better place than we were, for sure, but then this, we're serving a great God and we know this in Luke, isn't it 17, that if we are serving him, if at the end of it all we're just unprofitable servants, we've only done what was our Master's will and we can be satisfied with that. We are none of us worthy anything in his service. What are our works? What is our contribution? It is nothing, and whatever we might think of it, well, in the final analysis he could have done it much better himself if he willed. He could have found somebody else much better than ourselves to have done it. He surely could and we just look at ourselves and say we are but unprofitable servants.

Yet here's the balance of truth, that God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love. He remembers us and he remembers what we do. He remembers our prayers. He remembers our efforts and our toils among each and every one of us, that that work, that labor of love which is shown toward his name, well, he takes what we do for each other as being part of that, that we do for him. That's where when it talks about losing your first love for him in Revelation 2, it's actually very much about losing your first love for him in that you're cold toward each other, in that there is no love within the fellowship and in the life of the local church.

So good works, works of love, works of help, encouragements that we might give to each other, our prayers for each other, our labor alongside each other, God remembers it. He remembers what we do and we might think nobody sees it. Do this, out there on my own, nobody notices. It's hard work, it's toil, nobody sees. Wrong. God does and he even here describes himself that if he didn't remember it, well, it would speak ill of God. He is not unjust. He is not somebody that just requires of people that they just do this and they do that, and shouldn't think that he will pay a blind bit of attention to. Oh no. God holds himself to a higher standard than that and that he looks upon feeble saints and feeble churches and he sees what they do and their efforts and their toils. He sees their failures too but he sees what they attempt to do and their hearts, their intention and their love, however they're trying to express it.

And he remembers it and it is spoken of here as something that he, well, would encourage us with. That's what the writer is doing here because as these people perhaps flag and feel wearied and feel worried because of the persecution and that there is that almost temptation to give up, to stop, to become sluggish, to back away and just curl up in a corner and die, that he commends them that that which they have ministered to the saints in the past and do now minister, even if they're a little bit on life support, even though their efforts they have dropped off a bit but it's still something there. There is still some life there and he recognizes that. The writer recognizes that and says moreover God remembers it. He's not unjust to forget your works in that you have ministered and that you are still ministering, you do minister. There is life, that's why he's encouraged. He sees things that accompany salvation.

So love for the brethren, how sweet that fellowship is. That's why I love to go a couple of times a year, three times, four times sometimes to London. Didn't get there in January this year, too busy in the middle of house move and all the rest of it, but would have done normally and spend time with brethren I know from London and round and about, in fact, quite a few of them don't live in London anymore, they did what I've done, they moved out and now living, well, some of them down on the south coast there, the sunny south and the sea. But we come together and we refresh each other. We bear each other's burdens and woes and encourage each other, want to hear the news, if it's good news, or if it's sad news. We'll hear it and we'll pray for each other and do, and try to encourage each other in our work together.

And we remember how Paul often in his epistles would say that he remembers you in his prayers. He makes mention of you. He says, "I make mention of you in my prayers." The church at Ephesus, all the churches that he writes to, and it's good for us similarly to make mention of each other in our prayers, not to weary in praying. Well, in 1 John it gives us plenty of encouragement in this, 1 John 2:9-11. We could draw many instances of this in love for the brethren, "He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now. He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him. But he who hates his brother is in darkness and walks in darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes." There's 1 John 3:13-15. We could choose many examples but just a few here, when we read here, "Do not marvel, my brethren, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death. Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him." Well, there we have every encouragement there to love, and when we become sluggish in love and not willing to show love, well, we read it doesn't reflect well on us and we are encouraged to do better than that.

Well, where else do we see that God puts a value upon the works that we do for each other in that way? Well, we find it actually in Matthew 25 at the judgment throne, and what's God people find? What the elect of God find when they're there? It's a surprise. We read their surprise because what does the Lord say to them? A little lengthy reading, Matthew 25 and I'm going to read from there from verse 33 onto 40. "And He will set the

sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King," that's our Lord Jesus, "will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.'" Note what happens next, "Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?'" Then the answer, "And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.'"

Ah, you see, God is not unjust to forget our work, our labor of love, our work of faith, those things that are done in his name, why even that minimal cup of cold water that was proffered, done to the least of these my brethren, somebody that was almost invisible, somebody that didn't seem to have any standing or usefulness, if you like. And whatever you did, "Even that small act was seen and it was done as unto Me, it was done towards My name and it has been noted." Why, it is even referred to on the judgment day. It is brought up as evidence that you were a true believer, that you loved the brethren, that you were fully immersed and fully engaged in that.

So we can see here from the word of God that the King does, indeed, note these things, and we see, don't we, the surprise of the righteous. They didn't get it. They couldn't quite see how it was that they had visited him or seen him hungry and fed him, or thirsty and given him a drink, or a stranger and taken him in. And thus all acts of charity, our prayers for the persecuted church, our willingness to spend ourselves for people that we've never seen and never will, for missionaries in different countries some of whom we never seem to hear from but whom we love and whom we honor and respect and we pray for them and we remember them, and it is as though we were giving our Lord a drink or coming to him when he was hungry, praying for the people who are persecuted, it's as though we're visiting him when he was in prison. So God sees. God recognizes us, so there, friends, we're in a strong position.

Finally this, though. Third heading: great things ahead. Great things ahead, and this brings us particularly to the last part of our passage before us here this evening, verses 13 to 20. That is actually telling us don't be put off by some of the words that you might find there and some of the argument and the detail of it. It is a very closely reasoned letter, this. It takes us by supernatural routes. It brings in themes, it introduces themes that will be taken up later and it all just weaves together to form a remarkable piece of literature. But it's getting quite detailed here and we might wonder what is this immutability? When it talks about immutability in verse 17, immutability of his counsel, two immutable things. What's immutable? It's unchangeable. It doesn't. It's something that doesn't change. It doesn't alter. It can't be sort of altered afterwards. It's immutable, solid, secure, nothing about it will change. That's what it is saying there and, of course, his counsel. Well, those are his purposes, the purposes of God. There's something unchangeable about them. They're fixed. They're certain. They are immutable.

What is it telling us here? Well, it is telling us actually that we are where Abraham was. You notice a lot of references, isn't there, to the Old Testament, that these people are wanting to drift back to old covenant ways. Well, here are some characters from the Old Testament. Here's Abraham. What was his position? It was a very very strong position. He was spoken to by God at a very critical time in his life, and he was given incredible promises which left him in an incredibly strong position, and that is the same strong position that we, as believers, the believers here, with us as believers now are actually in.

And you'll notice some words keep repeating, words like promises. Verse 13, God made a promise to Abraham and he who obtained the promise in verse 15. And this is held before us. The word hope appears there. Hope. That word occurs on a lot of occasions. Well, it's actually there if we look back there in verse 11, that assurance of hope until the end. But hope is also before us in our passage in the latter part. This hope is there in verse 19. It's there in verse 18, to lay hold of the hope that is set before us. So hope, promises, this is something that we can hope in, that can elicit a response in us. God has spoken and God promises things. Well, we can promise things and whether we keep our promises there can depend on things well beyond our control sometimes, unforeseen, unforeseeable circumstances. God is not limited. When he speaks, he speaks clarity with all foreknowledge, he knows that nothing's going to stop what he says from being able to be realized.

And so as Abraham, yes, as Abraham, very key moment in his life was told great promise which God brought so that same promise is there for us. And those promises, something future, a blessing to come, we respond to it with hope. Faith and hope always go together. They're like twins. Faith, that belief in things unseen as yet, that response to those things, affirming those things. And hope is a particular sort of sub-category of faith where we respond to those future things with a real depth of conviction. Well, we can have hope because we've already got faith and that hope there burns as a kind of response, a kind of, yes, that arises from within our hearts.

So it's an expectation of future delivery by God on his promises, and this is what was given to Abraham. When was it given to him? How did this arise? Well, it's there in Genesis 22. We read it earlier, just to read again verses 15 to 18 of this chapter. Remember Abraham has been asked to do something incredible, that Isaac, his son, in whom is the promise, the Messiah, a Savior to come, that the nations will be blessed through this seed, and he's now been asked to put him to death. Incredible and we follow his journey and then we come to that place and when he's been relieved of that obedience of having to put his son to death, an angel of the Lord, the Lord Jesus actually, a theophany, appearance of the Lord Jesus we would say before his Incarnation, telling him to stop, to not do it because God now knows that, "You fear Me. You love Me." And this is what, then, the angel says, verse 15, "the Angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time out of heaven, and said: 'By Myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son--blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their

enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice."

Well, we might note that in chapter 6 of Hebrews there's quite a lot of talk about oaths, oaths and promises, people who swear an oath, who, as it were, will say something and then add something further to it to say this most certainly will happen. The Bible cautions against careless oaths, saying it and not meaning it, and here we understand that actually there is a place for oaths because God himself uses an oath and binds himself, as it were, to an oath. He swears that he will do this thing and we have it there in Genesis 22:15, "By Myself I have sworn." God looks, "How can I," if you will, putting it in this way, "find someone by whom I can say I affirm this most certainly, the promise that I'm making," there's the first thing, it's a promise, "but this promise is so underlying it that I will swear to it by the greatest thing I can swear to it by, hold Myself accountable to the greatest thing I can find." And of course, if God looks, well, it is only he, himself. He swears by himself. That is the greater. God's promise and the oath that he appends to it as he spoke it here to Abraham and what is it? Well, if you can see again, "blessing I will bless you," and to say, "I will bless you," but multiplies it. This is his oath he's working here. "I will surely bless you," he is saying. "I will surely multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven." Then the bit that really catches our attention in a way, "In your seed," verse 18, "all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice." You heard me, you did what I asked, you were ready to sacrifice your son. Well, you need not do that here now because there is a greater sacrifice one day and it is my seed, he's going to come from your family and who is going to be the blessing to all the nations of the earth. That, of course, is the Lord Jesus Christ. Abraham was given the solemn promise on oath from God that the Messiah will surely come from your family, traceable back to the line of your son whom I'd asked you to put to death and then when I saw your fear of me, I withstood you and you were able to stand back from that duty and another sacrifice was made there, that ram in the thicket, but eventually, of course, to be the Lord Jesus Christ.

He is the promised seed in whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed and Abraham believed it, and Abraham as we read there, after he had patiently endured in verse 15, he obtained the promise. These things happen. They came to pass. And he had many a trial, many disappointments, many a wrong step, and yet he prevailed, and the writer is saying and that's the position that we're in. That's what God spoke to Abraham and he underlined it by giving an oath, "Surely I will do this thing. Multiplying you, I will multiply you. Blessing you, I will bless you." And we are shown here those two immutable things. We posited that the first is his promise and the second is his oath. Two things. Well, he promises he can't lie and if he says it on oath, well, he surely can't lie. And we have that. We lay hold of that. There is our hope that has so solemnly promised that blessing to be ours through Christ and really nothing can go wrong. We're in such a strong strong position. We can move toward full assurance of hope. We can be as those who lay hold of the hope set before us, who have strong consolation, strong comfort. Not just a little warmth but something strong, something that's got heat, something that's got power because it's Christ. It's the promise made to Abraham which was a promise that he

held onto and prevailed, he endured, and is the same promise made to us. Why, the fulfillment is already here.

So it's the promise of heaven to come, what he will accomplish, what he has promised through his resurrection. That's available and that is there and we lay hold of that. By faith we come to him for our refuge, sheltering us from the stormy blast and judgment to come. We have a safe place, a refuge, and we have a real real hope set before us and he describes it, doesn't he, like an anchor, an anchor for the soul. Well, that holds the boat, doesn't it there? It keeps it in position. So when it's being tossed around and when the waves are coming and it's being moved about a bit, it stays actually in position. When the waves and the billows are rolled, it's still in position. It hasn't lost its location and that is what this hope is, sure and steadfast.

And the writer here, well, the hope, these things, these promises, that's where our hope is, but of course, we travel beyond mere words, a promise because the promise is of Christ and that's who he speaks of, isn't it, that one, that sure hope who has entered the presence behind the veil. We have a forerunner who has entered for us, even Jesus. Gone behind the veil. That's the veil, isn't it, we haven't time now to discuss this at length but the most holy place. A priest could only enter once a year and that with blood, for our Lord Jesus Christ has entered and the tearing of the curtain in the temple from top to bottom, what he was crucified showing that that way is now open and that the Lord Jesus Christ has entered with his own blood to appear before God, before his throne, and there God is satisfied with the sacrifice of his Son. Entered into the presence of God, entered into heaven for us. He's our forerunner. He's gone before us. He's shown us the way, that his resurrection has shown us. He came to life, he is the firstfruits and we are going to follow him in that.

Our Lord Jesus Christ entered for us. That's where he is now. He's praying for us. High priest, that's what he's doing, praying for his people. Weak, bedraggled, struggling people. Well, this is a strong position that we're in. This is strong consolation because it's none other than our Lord Jesus Christ who is the very center of our hope, who is in the promise that God gave to Abraham and multiplied it by showing it and by an oath, and that therefore this cannot fail. It is his immutable unchangeable counsel and the Lord Jesus Christ doesn't change either. He's gone into heaven for us, our forerunner, and there he remains for his people.

Then as you note, the writer who had begun to want to speak to us about Melchizedek right back in chapter 5 and verse 6 and was beginning to develop that but then had to break away from that, he's now going to go back to that because he finishes this passage by saying that he is a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. And in chapter 7, God willing, we'll look at next week, he'll begin to warm to that theme, a theme that he suspended in chapter 5, which he really wanted to talk about but didn't think he'd get far because you are dull of hearing, and so he digressed there. But now he thinks he's got the attention of his readers, that maybe they've done a little bit of thinking, a little bit of repentance, he can now begin to tell them what he wanted to tell them all along, that our high priest, this hope that we have, the promise that we're given far

eclipses Aaron at his best. And as a high priest who is forever entered into heaven forever, doesn't do a temporary work and die and somebody else has to replace him but, no, forever. And he never rest, he never slumbers nor sleeps. "He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep." That's our Lord. He is our keeper. He is our shade at our right hand, that the sun should not strike us by day and moon harm us by night. And he's that Savior and that intercessor and that friend who we all very much need. What a strong position that we are in.