

When God Swears to God

Hebrews 6:13-20

4/15/18

John Song

There was a little bit of a cliff-hanger left last week in that, how do we know that we can inherit the promises that the preacher of Hebrews is delivering? How can we be assured of the promise that God makes is a trustworthy promise? So this is what leads us to our passage here today. Before we begin, I'd like to just introduce myself. My name is John Song. I'm the pastor of youth ministries here. We would like to now at this time dismiss our children from ages four through first grade, who will go to their time in children's worship. And for the rest of you, let's all turn our Bibles to Hebrews 6:13-20, as we continue on in our series in Hebrews. Hebrews 6:13-20:

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. [ESV]

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Won't you pray with me?

Our great Father, we admit that today we struggle to take you at your word. We admit that we do not hold fast onto you, even though, as we've just sung, you hold fast to us. So today, even as we read these words of truth that tell us who you are, allow our hearts to be softened to receive these words through the power of your Holy Spirit. Allow our minds to engage in what the world thinks is just a routine of sitting here and listening to a sermon. And let it be transformative in our lives. Help us to desire to hear what you have to say to us here today. And allow the preacher the grace to speak these words. In the trustworthy name of Jesus Christ, whose promises we hold, we pray these things. Amen.

So here we are, Hebrews 6:13. Let's just kind of recap, and let us place ourselves in the time and the period in which this sermon was delivered in Hebrews 6:13. Let's all go back together. It's several decades after Christ's ascension. You're sitting in a time and a place in history where the Roman Empire rules supreme. Suddenly Judaism, which used to be a dominant positive force positively, is now seen as a fringe. Oppression and persecution seem not just on the horizon but imminent. Division threatens to tear your newfound faith in Christianity and your church apart, but in the issues of maturity, as we talked about last week, but also issues of doctrine. And everywhere around here in the culture, there are idols and temples demanding your worship. And you are told, by the way, if you do not bow down and worship these idols, you are disrupting the culture and the age. Your property and possessions could be taken away. You will face certain death if you don't bow the knee. Your family, everything you've ever lived for, all hanging on the promises of a God that you've only heard about, and his Son, whom you've never met.

So given the heaviness of all of that, let me ask you an honest question here today: how would you trust the promises of God in this case? Would you still trust in this Jesus Christ? Would he be the full assurance, as we talked about last week, that you would place your hope in this life? Can you take God at his word when the bleakest and darkest of scenarios is standing right in front of you? I mean, the reality of the situation as you peel back the layers of our own personal religious freedom and even our relative comfort of lifestyle—we are faced with those exact same challenges that the Hebrews of old faced here today.

I mean, think about it. The secular world rather than the Roman Empire reign supreme, along with all of its ideologies. Opposition and Christian persecution are imminent and already happening around the world. Division in the church has threatened to destroy it from the inside, both over, again, issues of maturity and issues of doctrine. And everywhere around you lies idols and temples made of credit cards, homes, phones, athletic competition—everything competing for your worship. And everything is telling you, your worldview needs to change. And if you don't, your position and status in this world, your family and everything that you ever lived for, are all hanging on the promises of a God that you've only heard about and whose Son you've never met.

See, this is the relevancy of Scripture for us here today. The question that's being asked in these seven verses is a question that's being asked of us: do you trust this Jesus and his promises? I mean, what gives us any right to hold onto the promises of God in light of this overwhelming pressure that we face? How could any of us here today find this place, this sanctuary, as it's appropriately titled, to be a place of refuge and of rest? This is the challenge that the sermon writer is presenting here. And the beauty of God's word is the joy in knowing and seeing how God's promise and his word remains true in spite of everything I just laid out.

So let's look here. How is the greatest promise obtained? How can we be certain in a host of uncertainties? Well, where does Hebrews start? Hebrews starts and calls its people and us to remember where we came from. And it starts with Abraham and the covenant made with him. For when God made a promise to Abraham. So why the focus on Abraham? Well, you've got to remember—see, Abraham was kind of like the Michael Jordan of the early fathers, right? He was a huge deal for the people of Hebrews. Why? Because to be associated with the line of Abraham is to be associated with the covenantal promises of God. To be associated with Abraham is to be the chosen. To be associated with Abraham is finding yourself living in the truth of God's promises, God's blessings, that your descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the skies. And this story, this tradition, would be passed down from generation to generation—down to Moses, to David, and so forth and so forth. To be a part of Abraham's lineage was to belong.

And just like a father telling his sons and daughters about what it means to hold onto your last name—this is what it means to be a Song. You know? This is how you should act. This is how you should live. So, too, the writer of Hebrews is reminding the people of God, they are told to remember the family that they belong to, the promises that are made to them, and what has already been done to show God's faithfulness in their lives. I mean, some of you, you know, you heard that children's song growing up about father Abraham. "Father Abraham had many sons. Many sons had father Abraham. I am one of them, and so are you. So let's just praise the Lord." Right? It's actually a theologically very deep song, when you think about it, right? The covenantal promises, family belonging—except for the whole right arm, left arm part. You know, we can just get rid of that. Those of you who didn't grow up with that song, have someone explain it to you. It's kind of strange. There's actually a lot of deep, covenantal, familial language in a song that we teach our children. You belong to this family. You belong in this lineage. You belong in this line of promises that God has already proven himself time and time again to be faithful to.

This is the power, by the way, of what we're doing here right now in this Sunday service. There's a strain of thought nowadays that church is simply an optional part of the Christian walk,

that this is something that we don't need to be reminded of every single week. You can skip. And the only point of church is to have sort of a memory exercise of the gospel or to simply just be intellectually stimulated and go home. No, what we're doing here is so much more powerful than that. Every week when we come here, we are reminded who our real family is. We are reminded who our brothers and sisters are in Christ.

We are reminded that every time we gather here together, what brought us together is family. Every race, socioeconomic background, upbringing heartache—how our Heavenly Father united us and remained faithful to the promises that he has made to each and every single one of us. So that when we leave this place, we walk out of here not just reminded of the gospel but refreshed by his grace through his son, Jesus Christ. We walk out of here, we spend time loitering in the lobby, talking to one another, comforting each other, praying for one another, laughing, our kids playing. We fellowship, because we are a part of this family. This is what it means to live in the greatest promise.

But, see, then the writer of Hebrews calls upon something that seems a bit irregular in his understanding of the text. Look at verse 15 here. It says, "And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise." Now, that line right there should call the reader a bit of whiplash when they hear "patiently waited." I mean, Abraham patiently waited? Patient? The reason for the sarcasm in my voice is that Abraham's life could hardly be one that could be considered a model for patience. Instead of trusting in the Lord's covenant to protect him and his family, he lies about his wife not once but twice. Never a good move. Instead of trusting the angel of the Lord coming and telling him that they would have a child, he laughs in his face and takes his wife's advice to have an affair with another woman. I mean, how can this guy be a model for patient waiting for the people of God?

Well, on this we have to take a look at two considerations. Number one, the life of Abraham, as flawed as it was—we have to remember that the New Testament consistently refers to Abraham as a man who was justified by his—what?—his faith. By his faith. The Book of Galatians continuously refers to the idea that Abraham was justified not by his examples of his worst weaknesses, but by his faith, and that that alone was accredited to him as righteousness. You've got to remember, it was Abraham who left his family in Haran to go to Canaan. It was Abraham who waited all those years for the promise of a son. And when Isaac finally arrived, it was Abraham who trusted God enough to sacrifice him on Mount Moriah. When push came to shove, this flawed family member was faithful.

By the way, this is much like you and I here today, isn't it? All of us here are children of Abraham. So, too, we look to the cross and see a resurrected Christ who stands for our perfection. And faith in him alone is our justifier, even when we have none. So, too, does our faith and redemption come and stands in our pillar of strength, even that we stand as a sinner even when we are impatient in our trials and in our weaknesses.

And the second point that we have to make about this patient waiting is that the greatest promise isn't coupled and tied to the character of the guilty person, but it's tied to the one who makes the promise sure. I want to repeat that again. The character of the promise—sorry—the greatest promise isn't coupled to the character of the guilty person, but the one who makes the promise sure. The track record of the one who makes a promise gives you the guarantee that the promise will be kept, despite the difficulty.

But it's more than just a great promise, isn't it? Now, these next set of verses here from 16 onward remind us that it is a guaranteed oath. Because God himself has sworn to himself. Now, on this, some of you might be wondering, what is the difference between a promise and an oath? Our confessional document of our church, the Westminster Confession, actually has an entire chapter

dedicated onto this. I'd love for you to read it, just to kind of see some of those differences. But the promises is more of a guarantee that it will be done. The oath includes this, but it has an additional element. And let me just go by way of analogy to describe this.

Perhaps the best analogy to describe this is found in our primetime television. You see, it's safe in America to say that we have a healthy—well, maybe not healthy—an obsession with courtroom crime shows. Law and Order, NCIS, Judge Judy, Law and Order: SVU, Suites, JAG, Law and Order: Criminal Intent. Right? There's something about the drama of the courtroom that leaves us wanting. We want the truth. Tom Cruise in *A Few Good Men*, right? We think we can handle the truth. We want to know what's real. And there's this dramatic moment in the sanctity of the courtroom, right? There's this scene where we get to this place where the person has the sworn oath. They stand in the courtroom. They place on the Bible. And they say the phrase that all of us here know. "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help you God?"

Do you ever think about how we started using that phrase and how that phrase now legally binds us to the point where if we're found guilty of not speaking the truth, we are criminally liable for perjury, and now we're ready to be sentenced just for breaking that oath? Well, the phrase actually didn't originate until the 13th century. It became codified in the English legal system. And actually, for 300 years, it took until the 16th century before this happened—you weren't even condemned if you lied when you made that oath. Because the thought was, "Oh, he just swore to God, and he lied about it. God's going to take care of him. We don't need to deal with him. God's going to deal with him later."

I find it striking that the legal system of old was founded on the idea that God himself would be watching every word you said once you said that oath, and would hold you to it, and would convict you if you didn't tell the truth. So what God is doing here when he's taking an oath—he's more than just making a promise. He himself is taking the stand. He is making an oath on his name and saying that he will do it. His character is on the line. God is swearing to God, because he is the highest thing that he could appeal to. He appeals to himself.

See, this is what we have to remember here. A promise or even an oath is only as good as the character of the person who makes it. The promise or oath is only as good as the character of the person who makes it. I mean, travelers, when an airline consistently cancels their flight, and they send you an apology, but the language that "an unfortunate situation has resulted," right? I mean, instantly their credibility is shot down. Parents, when your child says, "I'll have my room clean by tomorrow," you take that promise with a grain of salt, don't you? Parents, don't look at your kids right now. That's not good. All right. Just to make it fair, all right? Kids, when your parents say, "I promise I'll be there at this time," right? Same thing, right? Right.

The promise or oath is only as good as the character of the person who makes it. The height of this week's news in relation to social media is the fact that an oath was broken. A promise was not kept in relation to one's privacy. And when all of these things happen, whether it be familial, whether it be in the consumer market, whether it be with the internet, the worries and fear now pop up. Who do I trust? How do I access my data or privacy safely? Everything around me seems like chaos. Can I truly trust God? The answer is: yes. Because look to the character of God and how he has sustained you already to this place. Look to the love of God that was shown on the cross on your behalf. Look to the faithfulness of generation after generation of believers who held onto his word. This is who you can go to. This is the hope of the gospel and the surety that you have.

Our God has broken not one promise since the dawn of time. I want you to think of the magnitude of that reality. He accomplished everything that he said he would do. He has remained faithful to you in your moments of darkest tragedy. He has provided a place for the people of God

to reside here today to rest. He brings light in your deepest darkness, no matter how you come to church here today. Look to this Christ. Look to this grounded anchor. And this is the grounded anchor that holds us in the storm of life. Look at verse 19: "We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain." I want you to imagine—this is the hope of the message that held the Hebrews through the persecution of the Roman Empire. This is the anchor that upheld martyrdom for the sake of the gospel throughout the nations, when the word of God was deemed so offensive it was punishable by death. This is the hope that reaches the good news of Jesus Christ to you today who do not believe, to find something much more stable than whatever it is you've placed your hope and your life in so far.

This is an invitation. When you feel that you have nowhere to turn to, this grounded anchor goes before us as our forerunner, as the verse says, in our stead, so we could access where we once had no access. We can go behind the curtain to this greater hope. And the world, its trials and temptation, will continually tell you to place your anchor somewhere else—that that anchor somewhere else will do. I mean, why turn to Jesus when you've got that vice standing right there? Why turn to Jesus? You're capable and strong enough on your own. Religion is for the weak. I mean, did God really say that Christ was your only hope? Surely your needs and your passions and your desires play a role in that, too, don't they? God truly doesn't want what's best for you. I mean, after all, you can become like God.

See, this is the delusion that happens when you pick another anchor that isn't Christ. When the resurrected, glorified Jesus isn't our hope, we don't have a leg to stand on. We don't have a foundation for morality and good in this world. We don't have a foundation to understand why our lives have purpose and meaning in the universe. We don't have a foundation for telling the next generation and the next generation, "It's going to be okay. Everything will work out for God's good." The grounded anchor of our souls here today is this resurrected Christ who stands in your behalf. This is why the Lord precisely gives us a meal to celebrate with. This meal standing right here before us today, the Lord's Supper.

So here's what we're going to do. We're going to go right now and partake of this meal that God has given to us, a sign and seal of God's promises, his faithfulness to us. So could I have the brothers who are assisting with the Lord's Supper please come forward?