

The Patient Waiting that Inherits Promises

Hebrews 6:13-20

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(N.B.: This manuscript is an edited version of Pastor Russ Kennedy's previously delivered sermon for continuity of the series. To read Pastor Russ's full sermon, please see the Clearcreek Chapel sermon archives.)

Discouragement comes easily for us. We easily lose heart when we compare the reality of life with what we think ought or should be. Sometimes this is related to a true understanding of "oughtness". But often it is our own expectations of what we think life should be. We can easily be discouraged as we listen to the news of our cultural and political turmoil. The economy, both the larger scale concept as well as our personal bank accounts can be a source of struggle. We often seem to flail in a sea of sin, guilt, failure, and futility. Sometimes even among Christians we find that ministry is frustrating, and our companions often let us down.

The believers to whom Hebrews was written also faced significant discouragement. In fact, the author himself in verse 22 of chapter 13 describes this entire document as a "word of encouragement." His encouragement comes as he skillfully weaves instruction and challenge throughout this discourse.

We are in a larger section of the book that extends from a transitional paragraph in 4:14-16 and goes to the end of chapter 10. This unit opened with the start of instruction in 5:1-11 and then transitioned to a large section of challenge and exhortation that played out in 3 paragraphs, 5:12-6:3, 6:4-8, and 6:9-12. Our passage for this morning, 6:13-20 is the transition back to the instruction that will resume with the beginning of chapter 7.

The challenge has been severe (and complicated) thus far and the author concludes this somewhat harsh section with a word of hope. This paragraph is the basis of that hope. One that he is confident that they possess and exhorts them to hold on to in verses 9-12.

We are going to take the time this morning to read this section to see the full context. We will read from verse one of chapter 5 and carry it down to verse 1 of chapter 7.

For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness. Because of this he is obligated to offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for those of the people. And no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was. So also, Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him,

"You are my Son, today I have begotten you";
as he says also in another place,

"You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek."

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits.

For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.

Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation. For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do. And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

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.

For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him...

My prayer is that in hearing this text this morning, God by His Holy Spirit will lift up your spirit with encouragement so that you will be diligent to hold on to your hope and arrive safely at heaven's home.

A Pattern that Models (v.13-15)

For our encouragement, the author presents an *example* of how faithful God is to fulfill His promises. He takes us back to the 22nd chapter of Genesis and the promise God made to Abraham. Again, this paragraph presents the reason that supports his confidence in them. He challenged them to "show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end" as both the evidence and the means (he says "so that you may not be sluggish") that they inherit the promises. But it is grounded in the fact that it is God's promise that they are inheriting in their persistence. In verses 13-15 he states:

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.

The Scriptural Illustration (v.13-14)

In Genesis 22 we had the story of Abraham being tested by God in the offering of Isaac as a sacrifice. In the face of the long wait for the son God had promised, God then tested to see if Abraham loved God more than his son. Abraham passed the test that God required. While in the very act of raising the knife to slay Isaac, God stopped Abraham, pointed him to the substitute ram and in doing so, pointed Israel to substitute sacrifices until the true Son came as a sacrifice. However, the author of Hebrews hones in on the fact that in that event God underwrote His promise with an oath. God swore, swore that He would surely bless Abraham. And God swore "by Himself" because there was no one greater to swear by.

The Practical Observation (v.15)

Abraham indeed had left his home, wandered through land promised him and after long many years, fathered his promised heir. Now, he is tested by God to see if God's promised blessing would not become an idol – will Abraham love what God gives more than he loves God, the giver?

Yes, he obeys. He actively engaged in obeying God, even though it implies God would raise his son. With that promise at the fore, Abraham patiently waited. He understood that the very nature and character and reputation and fame of God was at stake in this and ultimately, in all of God's promises. God brought him through this test. "Do you love Me more? Do you believe My promises so much that you are willing to put an end to your hopes and dreams and paternal joys, just on my word?"

How much you have staked on God. Are you patiently waiting for your eternal future, your present joys and hopes? Are you banking on the surety of God's promises even in the middle of trial and struggle?

A Principle that Shows (v.16-17)

So, we have been told that God will do what He says, and we just need to be patient. But how is this an encouragement? Our author goes on to explain how God encourages us by His promises. Using concepts with which we have some familiarity, he develops this idea of an "oath."

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,

The Power of Human Oath (v.16)

We can understand quite simply what he is saying. When we want to guarantee our word, we swear by someone or something greater than ourselves. When we make this solemn oath, we are confirming what we have said and that ought to bring an end to any question or discussion about whether we are going to keep our word.

The Purpose of Divine Confirmation (v.17)

So, God did the same. God used a familiar cultural (almost timeless) practice so that Abraham and all subsequent readers of this narrative would be very clear about His promise. Further, God desired that we would see with startling clarity that He has an unchanging purpose towards those to whom the promise comes. So here is the Divine logic: "My purpose towards you will not change, so my promises to you will not fail. You can be just as sure of this as the fact that I God do not change. I will stake all that I am on this, my word to you."

But remember, this chapter of exhortation was a digression from another argument. Do you remember what that argument was. Look back at verse 10 of chapter 5. This section was prompted by concern of Jesus's priesthood in relationship to Melchizedek which was found in Psalm 110 where in verse 4 it states that that relationship was also confirmed with an oath. But let's return to the passage for the morning.

A Purpose that Encourages (v.18)

Why did God do this? What does He expect to come from it? The author presents this as an *exhortation* that encourages us in our hope. "God did this", the author says "on purpose." He expects that this will impart real encouragement.

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.

The Powerful Reason: God cannot lie...

God cannot lie. God is truth. God cannot act contrary to His own holy nature. He cannot change and He cannot lie. Now notice this, it is not that He won't just because God has set His mind to it. This not an act of God's determination; it is an outcome of His very nature. What God has said, He will do.

The Previous Requirement: We have taken refuge...

For whom is this true? Who are the recipients of this unchanging purpose and sure promises? We who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us. So there is a condition. This encouragement is not just for anyone. It is for those who have banked their lives, present and future, on God. We are looking constantly for His sovereign provision of sustaining and enabling grace. We have already fled to Christ. We have already sought refuge in the God of our salvation. In other words, this encouragement is to those who have embraced Christ and bowed to Him and hid themselves in Him.

The Personal Responsibility: Take hold ...

We then have "strong encouragement" to take hold of the hope offered to us. We have understood the preciousness of Christ and have banked everything on His promises and have committed everything about our future to His care and provision. Is that true of you? Maybe this is why discouragement and depression are so prevalent, even in Christian circles. We have not taken hold of the hope offered to us. We have staked our hope and our joy and our fulfillment in things present. And to our dismay, we find that they are fleeting and frustrating and failing. So, the exhortation this morning is to flee from the allurements of hoping in this world and its pleasures and to pursue your hope and purpose in God and His promises. Why? Because we have the sure anchor of a heavenly hope.

So, what are those two unchangeable things mentioned at the beginning of the verse? There are many options, but I think the author wants to think of those two oaths. One promises a royal-savior-son, the other a priest-son. We still have more to come about how this works, but at this point we have God's solemn oath to trust!

A Privilege that Anchors (v.19-20)

How does the Bible describe people's hope? Ephesians 2:12-13 describes some as having no hope. Indeed, it describes this situation as the condition of the lost. But in 2 Timothy 6:17 Paul indicates that are many who have a misplaced hope. They have placed their future confidence in temporal and passing things. But even among Christians, in 1 Corinthians 15:19, Paul describes some with an inadequate hope. Many who placed their confidence and desire, even in Christian truth, as being for this world only, have placed their hope and trust in Christ for the blessings and health and wealth that will come to them now. "What a pity", Paul says of them. So, what about us? Will we hear from this text an encouraging word that will show us our hope and cause us to lay hold of that hope?

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.

Our Anchoring Hope (v.19)

This hope is a firm and secure anchor. That means that I can rest assured that the passing pleasure of earth's pursuits will not cause me to drift. The anchor of our soul is a good one. It is firm and strong and reliable. It is sturdy and capable. The anchor is designed to be big enough and strong enough for the task. It is magnificently capable of securing your soul against eternal destruction and spiritual drift. Our anchor is crafted by God to be more than sufficient for the worst and the greatest of our sinning need. But more than that, our anchor is secure. It has been firmly grounded so that it can never be removed.

But its primary stabilizing effect is inward. It is meant to bring stability, security, and safety to our inner man, to our thoughts and wants. This future and upward confidence in God's person, purposes and promises so holds sway over our thoughts and wants that we diligently and obediently believe and obey. And it is a heavenly anchor. This anchor is cast upward to the heavens. It winds to heaven and into the throne room and enters behind the veil and runs right up to the mercy seat and is tied to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Our Advancing Help (v.20)

The author is taking us back to the Old Testament, to the imagery of the tabernacle. The inner Holy of Holies was separated by an immense curtain that blocked access. No one, except the High Priest once a year on the Day of Atonement, could enter. But Jesus through his death, resurrection and ascension has entered the real tabernacle. In the act of His sacrificial death, the curtain has been removed showing that we can now come to God. Here is our saving hope. He has pioneered the way. Jesus is our High Priest, our mediator, there in the presence of God interceding for us. But most of all, He is there as the never changing one whose purposes and promises towards us are utterly sure.

Reflect and Respond

We should be encouraged by this: God has an unchanging purpose that He shows us in His promises. That He will do what He has said is as sure as that He cannot change, and He cannot lie. Do you believe this in an obeying way that encourages your hope? This text distills three principles to encourage us. There is a patient faith that sees promises fulfilled. There is a kind of promising that encourages our hope. There is a hope that anchors souls in heaven.

Where is the anchor of our hope? What are you hoping in? Have you laid hold of the hope that is offered to you? Is your hope in Jesus? Is your desire and confident expectation in Jesus a soul anchoring hope that saves and sanctifies and will one day, glorify when Jesus comes?

Cast your anchor upward. Set your mind and your affections on Jesus and on those heavenly realities and sure promises and unchanging purposes.

Keep your focus forward. Deal with the past, yes. But keep your hope and expectation and excitement for what God is going to do.

Make your progress onward. With all the diligence God's enabling grace gives, "lay hold of and hold fast to" your hope. Read about it, Think about it. Share it. Embrace it. Be passionate about it. Press forward with all the disciplines and means of grace to see it fulfilled.

Let us read together verses 19 and 20 as we conclude:

*We have this [hope]
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.*