

Strong Encouragement Hebrews 6:13-20

Fresh off the holiday season, our family was not unlike some of you in this room—you hit the road too so that you could enjoy Christmas or New Year’s with those you love. We have our normal route—Nashville, Louisville, Cincinnati, then our destination, Chillicothe, Ohio. And nothing about our yearly trek should surprise us anymore. Lightning bolts, hail, snow, slow traffic, salty windshields, unseemly restrooms, sicknesses, unexpected wildlife, car problems brought on by unexpected wildlife, etc. Through the two and a half decades we’ve been making that drive, we’ve attempted to plan for some of those things over the years. Of course, we’ve not accounted for every negative outcome. How can you when weather predictions are simply predictions and thousands of three-ton hunks of metal, subject to human judgment, move sometimes inches from one another while quite often exceeding the speed limit? However, the various disruptions or hindrances experienced by most of us rarely if ever convince us to call off those trips. We may think about them, and plan for them, but realities running deeper than any potential setback govern our commitment to keep making those trips year after year.

We’ve seen that the writer of Hebrews has met his audience with a series of warnings and actionable responses to stay clear of a very specific danger—veering from the work of the Great High Priest on their behalf. And his cautions transcend the first century world. Who here is not susceptible to drifting away from the centrality of Christ in all things, growing dull in hearing God’s word, neglecting heart matters, or throwing aside the urgency of living for Christ today?

But on the back end of one such ominous caution concerning apostasy we find the bright rays that clarify the hope we have in the gospel.

I. An illustration for our hope

What might one relay to curb the temptations of these Jewish converts to abandon the gospel titanic for the rickety raft of obedience to the law, destined to sink by condemnation? You cite the case of one who would be the most forcible example.¹ In verse 12 these early Christians are encouraged to imitate others, “*those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.*” We have in this very letter a list—Abel, Enoch, Noah, Sarah, Rahab, Samson, David, etc.² But to our text, the author makes his appeal by the one whom the Jews called “father,” reflected in his very name, Abraham.

To him, *God made a promise*. It’s worth noticing that the author shows a sustained interest in Abraham throughout the letter.³ This is the second of four texts which brings Abraham to the fore. And if we’re thinking about the context, to whom this sermon is addressed, we’re in no way surprised at the connection the author is seeking to make with his readers. In fact, the names “Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” are used in Jewish history as a kind of summary for all of God’s people, with Abraham holding prime position as the patriarch of patriarchs. We’re encouraged here, coupling the latter half of verse 12 with verse 15, to inspect and emulate Abraham.

¹ Arthur Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews*, 341.

² Hebrews 11, the whole shebang

³ Peter O’Brien, *PNTC: Hebrews*, 235.

But there are some things needing sorted through before Abraham's example comes at us with maximum effect. We need to understand what God promised and the context in which He made the promise.

We read at the beginning of verse 14, ***“Surely I will bless you and multiply you,”*** a quotation from Genesis 22:17. And in that text, these words are coming off the heels of what was undoubtedly some of the most trying days in Abraham's life. The horror of hearing those words, *“Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on the one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.”*⁴ Self-serving, worldly wisdom wants to shout into the pages of scripture, “Take Isaac and run, Abraham!” or “No god has the right to make such a demand!” Maybe Abraham has some questions of his own. How could he put out of his mind what God said back in Ur, *“I will make you a great nation?”* Or what God said to him as he viewed the land of Canaan for the first time, *“To your offspring I will give this land.”* But in the face of such a distressing command, astoundingly Abraham tells his servants that both he and his son will *“come again to you.”* He tells Isaac that *“God will provide the lamb for the burnt offering.”* The author of Hebrews even tells us that Abraham *“considered that God was able even to raise [Isaac] from the dead.”*⁵ And that kind of trust is meant to awaken doubt in those who read of such a response. So, the context of the promise is made after Isaac is delivered by the substitution of a ram caught in the thicket. Thus, before this ordeal and after this most trying episode imaginable, God promises Abraham future blessings.

The context, then, helps us to zero in on the content of the promise. God spared Isaac. He is the child of the promise. And He spared Isaac so that he could have Jacob. And God spared Isaac so that Jacob could have Joseph. And God spared Joseph so that Joseph could have Judah. Some of you know where I'm going with this. Matthew's Gospel shows the significance of that lineage that builds and ends with *“Jesus, who is called the Christ.”* And Paul ties things together, *“for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith...And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.”*⁶ God is faithful to His promise to give life to all who believe in Abraham's greater Son.⁷ If those who received this letter had intentions of walking away from such an inheritance because of the difficulties that came with saving faith, then the author is encouraging them to take a walk with Abraham. He left family and land, waited decades for his wife to bear a child, and when the child came, God seemed to be violating His own promise by telling Abraham to sacrifice his son. Abraham's world turned upside down more than once.

One of the marks of our culture is that, in all of our strength and wealth, we are fragile. We make little to no space for imposition, interruption, or the unexpected. Our thirst for the now and the wow has parched our land of patience and acceptance concerning those things in life we can't control. At this kind of viewing life as something to be wielded at one's will and leisure, many take the most convenient paths to avoid what is hard. I envision some who read this letter in the first century bristled at hearing the plea of the author to show earnestness in hoping in Christ to the end. Life in Christ was difficult. It's built into its mainframe. We're slow to embrace that sanctification is a marathon with a thousand falls, but we think, “Give me the easy way.” “Give me the checklist of regulations to follow. I want to do those things I used to do—the familiar, the safe, the

⁴ Genesis 22:2

⁵ Hebrews 11:19

⁶ Galatians 3:26, 29

⁷ Matthew 1:2-16

conventional. I want to do what pleased me, what made me socially acceptable, and what made me feel good.” They had not yet learned patient waiting, reflecting the life of the one called their father, **Abraham**. He *patiently waited* and eventually *obtained the promise* of life in glory.

A similar litmus was applied to the Galatian church, as some of them were being tempted to reverse course into law-works, “*O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. [2] Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? [3] Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? [4] Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? [5] Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith—[6] just as Abraham ‘believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.’ [7] Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.*”

So, am I talking about faith or about hope here? Yes. Hebrews 11:1, “*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*” Remember, the aspect of salvation borne out in Hebrews is the final deliverance of all Christ’s sheep at the end of the age. Their father Abraham looked into the future, in the middle of his trials, and was assured of God’s promise that His lineage meant life and grace. The obvious challenge was for these believers to focus and see the same.

II. The foundation of our hope

Hope, as the world posits, is a kind of positive expectation that something good could happen. I hope lunch is tasty. I hope my next sermon is better. I hope we wake up to several inches of snow tomorrow. But fundamentally, this misses the mark when we talk about hope in the biblical sense of the word. You see, none of my hope statements were rooted in anything sure. Lunch could be terrible, and we could receive rain instead of snow. But God unfolds hope in our text as something that we can sink our teeth into. It’s not crossing our fingers for a particular outcome, but it is a certainty of the future which arises from an objective reality, an established truth.

Look at verse 13, ***For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself.*** What, you might ask, is needed to undergird a promise of God? If I was *incapable* of telling a lie, any simple promise would carry with it the assurance that I am unquestionably trustworthy. Yet here we read, that to Abraham and all that the promise signified to his spiritual progeny, God swore an oath.⁸

We have little context for how serious oath-taking was in antiquity. Oaths served to provide surety for the truthfulness of what was being communicated, especially in an oral tradition. It was a kind of seal to the promise which communicated the seriousness of the one promising. Bare promises were not enough, especially when two parties were at loggerheads and a lie might be the difference between guilt or innocence, wealth or poverty, life or death. So opposing parties were called upon to, vs. 16, ***swear by something greater than themselves.*** In many contexts, some deity would be invoked, and the implication was that if the promise with an oath was compromised, the oath-

⁸ Again, Genesis 22 is the original account of God doing this.

breaker would welcome on himself/herself some form of divine displeasure.⁹ From ancient times, oaths have been incorporated into treaties, legal documents, and legal proceedings to maintain trust within the parties involved in those systems. The *oath* was **final for confirmation** of the promise.

Fast-forward to our day, we're all familiar with the scene of raising the right hand in a court of law to swear an oath of truth. Our language has not changed much from the language of this very passage. We *swear* people in when they testify. In many courtrooms, though a formality in many cases, we still conclude an opening oath with "so help me God," appealing to a power higher than us.

But God, whose Word has never fallen to the ground, **swore by himself**.¹⁰ And He swore by Himself because there is no one above Him, in either authority or character. He appeals to no one. He needs no verification that He can be trusted. He is altogether truthful. And though God's impeachable character didn't require the need to seal His promise of grace, He stoops into our legal and contractual world, much of it based on distrust and manipulation, and He promises with an oath anyway. Why? Is it not to doubly assure His church, you and me, **the heirs of the promise**, of His unbreakable commitment to "save to the uttermost?" In fact, look at the next verse, **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**. To show us **more convincingly** that we are secure, promised to by a LORD who cannot lie and oath-ed to out of the abundance of His grace. It's the lift that his unsure readers needed, and if we understand it, it can lift us and encourage us forward in hope. The promise with an oath is a "*cord of kindness...a band of love*"¹¹ meant to draw back any who are tempted with self-justification schemes ending in destruction.

But there's more to verse 17. **God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose**. Think with me on another man, that likely lived near the time of Abraham. This man feared God and shunned evil; a man who loved his wife and children, concerned for them in every way; a man flourishing in all his undertakings and renown in the community; a man of stature and wisdom, devoted to the God of heaven. And one day, in just a few short minutes, he is robbed of his wealth and left bereft of every one of his children. In the days to follow, he is covered in festering boils and made to contend with a peanut gallery who mistook their lengthy counsel for wisdom. In that context, the man stripped of life as he knew it articulated these words to God, "*I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.*" I mean, would you have come to that conclusion? James tells us that this man named Job remained steadfast, trusting in God's wisdom, though everything seemed to be working against him. Yes, the Sabeans and Chaldeans and Satan purposed evil, but there was a purpose that dwarfed them all. And at the end of Job's life, God grants us a picture of resurrection and restoration, that we might hope forward like Job. He trusted in the **unchangeable character** of God's **purpose**, which was rich with renewing mercies.

Notice the flow of the whole: **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, [18] so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge**

⁹ Ben Witherington, *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians: Hebrews, James, Jude*, 224.

¹⁰ Joshua 21:45, "Not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass." Not one word!

¹¹ Hosea 11:4, "I led them with cords of kindness, with the bands of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them."

might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. These *two unchangeable things*, then, are God’s word of promise and God’s oath. His promise will stand. His oath will remain binding. Whatever belongs to our entire, complete salvation—from regeneration to glorification—God has gone to great lengths to encourage us that He will undoubtedly bring it all to pass. But notice the purpose clause that begins verse 18. Why did He take the extra measure? So that we might *have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.* Again, this divine oath was a step the LORD ordained to take, not because His promise lacked ability, but because He *desired* to lift our heads and strengthen our hope. This promise with an oath is the foundation underneath all that God has done in Christ.

But the writer of Hebrews doesn’t limit that encouragement to hope by only describing what the hope is grounded in.

III. The necessity of our hope

[18] ...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. Doesn’t this imagery fit the context? If the Jewish professing revert to Judaism and stay there, back to Hebrews 6:9—they’ll have no sanctuary from the curse of everlasting flames. There’ll be no cleft for the soul to hide away from God’s just fury.¹² But, if we keep going in Christ our Lord, keeping our eyes fixed on Him in hope, then under the shadow of His wings we will not be condemned.¹³ We will have a fortress in the day of trouble.¹⁴ We will never run out of occasions to sing of His care.¹⁵ Indeed, death itself won’t be able to deprive us of the defense of His righteousness in our place.¹⁶

Perhaps the penman-preacher of Hebrews appealed to this image to show them that if they fled to this refuge at first, then deserting the refuge would expose them once again to the same dangers that once threatened. God has promised life in the gospel and sealed it with an oath. His purpose for our everlasting good will remain unmoved. Dear Jewish brothers and sisters, you have run into this “*strong tower.*”¹⁷ My brother and sister, you have found refuge in His name. Now cling to God’s promise and oath and live in hope until the end! They needed, and we need, a *refuge*.

But look what else is ours by this hope. Verse 19, *We have this [hope] as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul.* They needed an *anchor*. Oh, how we need an anchor! This metaphor comes from the seafaring world. Doesn’t life often feel like a ship being tossed about haphazardly? And for these believers, they were wavering in doubt. They were being ridiculed or worse for their newfound faith. They were being tossed about by the temptations to escape the new cross-bearing in exchange for recognizable bearings. Some were at an all-important crossroad—stay or leave? They were unsteady. They had taken their spiritual attentions off the superiority of Jesus and were crowning their feelings, familiarities, and circumstances as lord.

¹² Romans 2:8

¹³ Psalm 36:7

¹⁴ Psalm 59:16

¹⁵ Psalm 5:11

¹⁶ Proverbs 11:4

¹⁷ Psalm 18:10

The absurdity of sailing towards a gathering storm in the middle of the ocean is self-evident. If these Jewish converts to Christ jump back into the waters of the Mosaic Law, they need to be warned that all anchors are up while they reject Jesus and hold Him up in contempt. There are no anchors for lives that oppose the gospel. But an *anchor* is drawn where an enduring hope in Christ is lively. We may have crazy troubles on top of life's waters, but deep down there is "*Christ in [us], the hope of glory.*"¹⁸

Verse 19 rounds off the images showing our need. Notice how our hope is personified. We have *a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, [20] where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.*

The run-of-the-mill high priest through the ages only entered God's presence as a representative for sinners, but Christ's priesthood was radically different—"He has gone where He bids us come."¹⁹ The high priest had to keep people away from the most holy place. Jesus went before His people so that they could freely come. We have the access to life and love and fellowship with the Triune God, not simply once a year, but every day Christ reigns in our hearts as King. Because He went before us, we can come and find fellowship. Before God we "*find access to breath our sorrows*" because the Man of Sorrows went on ahead.²⁰ Before God, we will be "*presented blameless before the presence of his glory...*" because Christ was blameless.²¹ Before God, the words of welcome will be ours, "*Well done...enter into the joy of your Master,*"²² because Christ was affirmed and rejoiced over by all of heaven by a resurrection.

A forerunner, an anchor, and a refuge—the desperation of our need is met by this *high priest forever.* We have no stronger reasons to hope in God, who cannot renege on His Word or shift in His purpose.

Conclusion

To stir by warning only—the Holy Spirit wouldn't have it that way. We're to be likewise propelled onward in our journey with Christ by being assured of His grace and power to carry us along until the end. To keep running to win the prize we must see the dangers of going backwards, but also grasp the unshakable foundation that is ours in the gospel. The warning disturbs and the promise assures, and they both serve the same end—that readers might be deeply moved to hold fast to the hope set before us in Christ.²³ So, what is your hope in life and death?

We plan to make another trip to Ohio this coming December. Will there be a measure of danger? For every road trip there is that. Will we plan for the unexpected? We'll try. But the realities running deeper than any potential setback are the reasons we keep journeying on each year. Saints, keep journeying on because He has loved you so well. He has promised with an oath. He is all you need to steady your today and secure your tomorrow.

Our hope is built on nothing less.

¹⁸ Colossians 1:27

¹⁹ <https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/confident-of-better-things/>

²⁰ Hymn, "Dear Refuge of My Weary Soul"

²¹ Jude 24

²² Matthew 25:23

²³ C.R. Koester, *Salvation in the New Testament Perspectives on Soteriology*, 361-387.

