

Sermon Summary #18

Why Does it Matter that God Cannot Lie? Hebrews 6:13-20

To what lengths do you think God might go to provide you with rock solid proof that he loves you and will fulfill his promises to you? How extravagant might his efforts be? Is there a limit to what he might do or say in order for you to be encouraged and reassured that his promise to save you cannot be broken?

If there is no limit or boundary or length to which God will *not* go to make certain that you know he can be trusted, what action might he take or what words might he speak? When he says “You are mine forever,” and you and I respond by saying, “That sounds good, but how can we know for sure,” what might God then do to reinforce the truthfulness of his promise and pledge?

Would you prefer that he write it in the clouds above? That would be a significant miracle and expression of divine power, but what happens when the wind blows and the clouds dissipate and the message is no longer visible for you to see? Would you prefer that he make a down payment; perhaps some sort of monetary deposit to guarantee that he can be counted on to come through on what he says?

Think about how you and I go about trying to reinforce our words to assure someone that we really mean what we say and that we will really follow through on our promises. We typically take an oath, saying something like:

“Cross my heart and hope to die!”
“I swear on my grandmother’s grave!”
“May lightning strike me dead on the spot if what I’m saying isn’t true.”
“By all that is holy I swear to you that I won’t let you down.”

The point of the oath is to underline or to insure, as much as we possibly can, the truth of what we have said or the certitude of what we have promised. *An oath is something of an exclamation point after our promise.*

This is similar to what we read here in Hebrews 6:16 – “For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation.” In other words, you wouldn’t put much stock in my promise to you if I said, “If I’m lying to you I swear I’ll give you my dirty, unwashed gym socks.” Or, “I promise on the life of my pet turtle that I’ll pay back every penny that I owe to you.”

Those sorts of pledges or oaths don’t carry much weight, and the reason is obvious. No one cares anything at all about their dirty, unwashed gym socks or their pet turtle. Well, they may care a bit for the turtle, but not enough for it to hold them to their word.

Typically, then, in order to make it clear that we mean what we say and that we will most definitely follow through on our promises we swear an oath by appealing to something greater and more valuable and more precious than ourselves. Once that is done, as it says in v. 16b, the dispute is settled and the oath we’ve taken is final confirmation that the person can trust us.

But God has a problem. By what can he swear? If God says to you and me, “I love you with an eternal love and I’ll never, ever stop loving you,” *to what might he appeal to drive home the certainty of that promise?* If he says, “I swear to you on the existence of the earth and all it contains,” that hardly does any good. After all, if the earth ceased to exist he could simply call into existence a new one. Or, “May Satan put an end to my life if I’m lying to you.” That won’t work either, because God is by definition eternal and immortal and can’t die. Neither is it of any help should God swear by the angels Michael and Gabriel. There are tens of thousands of angels and the loss of two

is of little significance. The point is simply that the Creation is of infinitely less value than the Creator and therefore cannot carry sufficient weight in an oath.

So what must God do to make sure you and I will be encouraged and reassured in the knowledge of his love for us and his future plans for us? There is only one thing to which God can appeal in taking an oath, and that is *himself!* If one takes an oath that will carry force one must always appeal to something more valuable or greater than oneself. But God is the greatest and most valuable and most worthy and most honorable and most beautiful being in the universe. Therefore, he can only swear by himself. **He** is the final court of appeal.

When he says, “**By** God, **I** God will never leave you or forsake you,” he is telling us that it is as unlikely that he will break his promise to bless and save us as it is that he will despise and dishonor his own name. Is there *any* likelihood that God will *ever* despise and dishonor his own name? No. Then there is *no* likelihood that he will *ever* break his word of promise to you and me.

But if God’s word is infinitely reliable and trustworthy, why must he swear at all? It can’t be because the credibility of God is questionable or doubtful. Surely God does this by way of accommodation to us. The oath itself adds nothing to the reliability of God’s initial promise. It does not make God’s statement truer than it would have been otherwise. God’s word, for no other reason than that it is God’s word, is indefectible and immutable and always rock solid true. But for our sakes, in order that you and I may be increasingly encouraged and overwhelmingly convinced and all doubt forever removed, God added the oath.

That is the message God has for you and me today from Hebrews 6:13-20.

To whom does this Promise apply?

Let’s begin by noting precisely to whom this promise is given. The recipients or objects of this great blessing are described in two different ways.

First, they are called “*the heirs of the promise*” (v. 17). Who are these people? How does one become an heir of the promise? I am an heir to my earthly father and mother. My children are my heirs and, if there is anything left over once Ann and I are gone, they get it. But that is an inheritance that is based on biology and physical descent. So what can it possibly mean to be an “heir” of God?

The answer is found in Galatians 3. There we read in v. 16 what might appear to be a discouraging word for most of us here today: “Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring” (v. 16a). That’s discouraging because I’m not a physical descendant of Abraham. I’m a Gentile, and so too are most of you. But then Paul says this in the second half of the verse: “It does not say, ‘And to offsprings,’ referring to many, but referring to one, ‘And to your offspring,’ who is Christ.” ***The ultimate and primary heir of the promise to Abraham was Jesus.***

So how does this affect you and me? Paul gives us the answer later in Galatians 3. We read in v. 26 that “in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith.” If you are “in” Christ by “faith” in his life, death, and resurrection, you are as much a “son” of God as is Abraham or any other believing Jew. Then we read this in vv. 28-29 – “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ***And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.***”

So, when the author of Hebrews refers to “the heirs of the promise” he means everyone who has faith in Christ, whether Jew or Gentile, whether slave or free, whether male or female. Gender doesn’t matter. Economic status doesn’t matter. Ethnicity doesn’t matter. The only thing that matters isn’t whether or not Abraham’s blood flows through your veins but whether or not Abraham’s faith is in your heart!

Second, he also describes these heirs of the promise as those “*who have fled for refuge*” (v. 18). This is an unmistakable reference to Numbers 35:9-28. God told Moses that when the people of Israel crossed over the Jordan River into the land of Canaan that they were to designate six cities as “*cities of refuge*” (Num. 35:11). A city of refuge was a special city where someone who accidentally killed another person could flee and find safety until his case could come before the people for judgment. Lest the family of the victim seek out immediate vengeance, the accused could find protection and refuge in one of these six cities.

Our author is saying that just like sinners in the OT who sought physical protection in a city of refuge, we have sought spiritual protection in Jesus Christ. **He is our City of Refuge!** We are safe in him! We are protected from the evil one in him! We are not subject to anyone's judgment because we are in him!

So what is the Promise?

What precisely is it that God has said to you and me that he is so determined that we believe and never doubt? In v. 17 it is called "the unchangeable character of his purpose." **So what is this "purpose"?** We've already encountered the answer to this over and over again in Hebrews. Back in Hebrews 2:3 he called it "a great salvation." Also included in the "purpose" of God is bringing the whole of creation into subjection to our authority. This we saw in Hebrews 2:5-9. There's more. In Hebrews 2:14-18 God's "purpose" is said to be setting us free from the fear of death and making "propitiation" for our sins. In Hebrews 4 this "purpose" is described as the provision and experience of eternal "rest" for God's people. And we will see later on in Hebrews 11-13 that this "purpose" is finally fulfilled when we experience the consummation of our salvation in the New Heavens and New Earth.

God's "Desire"

Some might be tempted at this stage to ask a question: "Is God really into this? Is this something that actually means something to him? How serious is he about making it possible for us to have full assurance of hope?"

The answer is given in v. 17 – "So when God **desired** to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose . . ." This is God's desire, his passion, his longing, his deep and unfaltering yearning. He *wants* to do it!

This is no small matter to God. This isn't something he can take or leave. This is something that pulsates in his heart and drives and energizes him in all that he does. As I said a couple of weeks ago: God *wants* you to know that you belong to him. God *wants* you to live in the full assurance of your hope. God *wants* you to live in the peace and confidence that his purposes for you will never fail to come to pass. This is what God *wants* and he will go to extraordinary lengths to make sure it happens.

Two Unchangeable Things

We are told that the way God acted to "show more convincingly" to us the "unchangeable character of his purpose" was to guarantee his word by **two "unchangeable things"** (v. 18). What are they?

The **first** unchangeable thing is **the promise** itself. God doesn't promise to save you and protect you and preserve you until you enter into the full experience of your spiritual inheritance in the same way that you and I make a promise. There are numerous things that often interrupt and disrupt our ability to carry through on our promises. But not with God. He is infinitely powerful, infinitely truthful, infinitely resourceful, infinitely wise, and infinitely committed to bringing your salvation to complete perfection.

Simply put: God said it, and therefore God will do it.

But he doesn't stop there. He could have, and that should be enough for us. But he adds to the equation yet another, **second**, unchangeable thing: **an oath**. God first promises and then swears by it. He says: "I will never leave you or forsake you. I will complete in you the work I began when you first trusted Jesus. And not only that: **I swear to you by my own name that what I've promised is true. I appeal to myself, and there is none higher, that I will be true to my word to you.**"

Why are these "things" Unchangeable?

But how do we know that these "things" are "unchangeable"? Everything changes. Time and history and unforeseen events and sudden shifts in life and culture make everything unstable and uncertain. Yes, everything except God! These "things" are unchangeable, that is to say, God's promise and God's oath are unchangeable because **the God who makes the promise and swears the oath cannot lie!**

The title for my sermon may sound silly, but it really does matter that God cannot lie. If God could lie, he wouldn't be God! The God who presents himself to us as God is little more than a devil if he can lie. If God can't be trusted, then by all means let's cut him loose and find someone else to do for us what needs to be done.

How do I know that all who have fled for refuge in Jesus Christ will be eternally saved and secure? I know because God cannot lie! First he made a promise. And that promise comes in several different expressions:

"I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst" (John 6:35).

"All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out" (John 6:37).

"And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day" (John 6:39).

"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand" (John 10:27-29).

"And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6).

"I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Heb. 13:5b).

And second, he confirmed that promise, he guaranteed that promise, he signed, sealed, and delivered on that promise with an oath. He has sworn by the glory and beauty and majesty of his own name and character that he will honor his word and fulfill his promise.

"Sam, can a born-again believer in Christ at some point in his or her life be cut off from Christ and lose or forfeit their salvation? Yes, *if God can lie* they can!" But God cannot lie. So, no, a born-again believer in Christ can never be cut off from Christ.

And what is it that God wants us to experience?

And what is the result of this promise and this oath? What is it that we should experience as we meditate on this remarkable, breathtaking truth? Our author answers the question in v. 18 – "so that . . . we who have fled for refuge might have *strong encouragement* to hold fast to the hope set before us."

"Wait a minute! Sam, I thought you just said that whether or not we ultimately experience the fulfillment of our hope in Christ is up to God. You said this was his desire. You said that he has promised and sworn to bring our salvation to completion. But now you appear to say that we human beings, we born-again believers in Jesus, must ourselves 'hold fast' to this hope that is set before us. So which is it? Do we hold fast to this hope, or does God hold fast to us?" Yes!

Let me explain. What we see all through Scripture is that God promises to keep us safe and secure not so that we don't have to keep ourselves but precisely so that we may be empowered to hold fast our hope firm until the end.

In other words, you and I ask the question: Why does the author of Hebrews encourage us to hold fast to our hope (v. 18)? If our holding fast was obtained and rendered secure by the blood of the cross, why are we here told that we must hold fast to it?

We must remember that what Christ did for us on the cross was not to set us free from having to hold fast to him. What he did was to secure or obtain for us the power so that we can hold fast to him. He didn't die and rise again so that we wouldn't need to be exhorted to persevere. He died and rose again so that he might provide us with the power to persevere. He didn't die and rise again so that we wouldn't have to be vigilant and disciplined and

determined to remain true to him. He died and rose again so that he might fill us with the energy and incentive and sustaining strength necessary for us to be vigilant and disciplined and determined.

All of this is simply another way of saying what the Apostle Peter said in 1 Peter 1:5. There we are described as those **“who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”** God’s power doesn’t deliver you from the need to have faith. It provides that faith! God doesn’t exert his power so you can be released from the necessity of believing, but to empower you to keep on believing. God’s preservation and protection of you and me is accomplished through our faith in him, a faith that he promises to sustain and uphold and preserve in our hearts.

So God’s aim, his desire, his focus is that you and I would experience an ever-increasing, always-expanding, full assurance of hope. He doesn’t want us hanging on by our proverbial fingernails with a flimsy, fleeting wish. He wants us to experience a robust, joyful confidence that our hope in Jesus will reach its consummation.

The reason this is so important is that, with the passing of time and the accumulated impact of the multiple pains and disappointments of life, the Christian’s hope of an eternity with God can erode and fade and we can begin to drift. Unless we are diligent and vigilant to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, our Great High Priest, the reality of the forgiveness of our sins and the expectation of life in God’s presence will grow dim and fuzzy. And when it does we will soon turn to other hopes, worldly hopes, fleshly hopes, hopes that appear to offer much but deliver on absolutely nothing.

To what is your soul anchored?

Of course, hope is only as good as the one in whom it is placed and the one on whom it is fixed. That is why he tells us in vv. 19-20 that **our “hope” is Jesus himself!** When Jesus ascended from this earth following his resurrection he entered into the heavenly Holy of Holies, the very presence of the Father, and he has done this “on our behalf” (v. 20) and as our great high priest in order to guarantee that when we depart this life we will join him there.

And **our souls are anchored to him!** The metaphor of an anchor conveys the idea of stability, rootedness, fixedness, connectedness. The function of an anchor is to prevent drifting. When winds blow and waves rock the boat, an anchor holds the ship secure. Our souls are secure, therefore, not primarily because we have good and great faith, but because we have a good and great high priest in whom that faith has been placed, in whom that faith is anchored and held secure.

Conclusion

So let me close by asking once again: How do we gain **full assurance of hope**? How we do gain **strong encouragement**? The answer is **not** by looking inwardly at the state of our souls. The answer is not by conducting a psychological examination of our own subjective condition of mind and heart. The answer is not by looking at ourselves at all.

The answer is by looking to Christ! See him: the uncreated Creator God who became a human being . . . who lived a sinless life and died a sacrificial death and rose again from the dead . . . who then entered into the heavenly Holy of Holies as our great High Priest, there to reign utterly supreme and ever to intercede on our behalf. Look to Christ! And let the knowledge of who he is, what he has done, and what he will continue always to do cause faith, hope, assurance, and encouragement to rise up in your heart.