

## **A Better Promise**

Hebrews 6:13-20

If you're a "smart shopper," one of the factors you might consider when weighing certain products is whether they come with any kind of guarantee. About a week ago I discovered a leak in our water heater. So I called Rob Stanley. So Rob swoops into action, and does his research, and figures out that our water heater was still under warranty. The manufacturer promised it would last a certain number of years, and backed that promise with a warranty. So that when it failed before those years were up, they paid the majority of the cost to replace it.

All products make promises, right? The best picture quality in a TV, the most reliable mobile network, the world's best cup of coffee. But are they willing to back up their words? Are they willing to make a guarantee? To take an oath—that what we say about this product is true, and if you find otherwise, then we swear we will give your money back, or we'll replace it, or otherwise make it right. And the point of that oath or guarantee is to convince you to trust the product. Not just to spend your money, but sometimes to trust your life to it. When you're shopping not for a TV or a water heater, but for brakes for your car, or a carabiner for rock climbing, or a parachute for skydiving—your life literally depends on whether that product keeps its promise. And so to convince you of the utter certainty of their promise, many companies will back it up with an oath, a guarantee.

In our passage this morning, God does something very similar. Not because his promises are unreliable, but because he wants to convince his people of the utter certainty of his promises—promises that he has been calling on his children to trust in and cling to—namely the promise of an eternal inheritance in Jesus Christ.

The major aim of the book of Hebrews is to urge and encourage God's people to finish well, to persevere in faith, to hold fast to Christ all the way to the end. That was the note we left off on in ch. 6:12: to not be sluggish or lazy, but be "imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises." And this was an urgent message for the church this letter was written to, because they were facing all sorts of pressure to let go of Christ and go back to Judaism, to return to the old covenant and all its religious fixtures, as though Jesus hadn't come or wasn't the Messiah.

And it's an urgent message for us today, too. We might not be tempted to go back to Judaism, but there are all sorts of ways we might be tempted to doubt God's promises and loosen our grip on Christ. Sometimes it's ridicule for our faith—you're stupid for believing that stuff. Sometimes it's the draw of this world and its glittery promises. Sometimes it's the simple fact that walking with Jesus is hard, and we don't always do a good job, and we're tired, or we're lazy, and so there's a temptation to just give up or give in. It would be so much easier to go with the grain of the world, rather than against it. And sometimes, it seems that despite all our efforts

and perseverance in following Christ, that God's not keeping up his end of the deal. Our prayers go unanswered. Our loved ones walk astray. God promises life and we feel death in our bones. He promises peace and our troubled hearts keep us up at night. He promises to be with us, and we feel alone. Can we really trust God to keep his promises?

It's an honest question. And so God in his compassion meets us where we're at to bolster our faith with a double assurance. Two unchangeable things—his promise, backed up with an oath. Because even though we don't always feel it, or we feel pulled to something else, God's promises in Christ are utterly secure, and offer a steadfast anchor to our souls.

So how does he convince us of this? First, he starts with an example in vv. 13-15—the power of God's promise in the example of Abraham.

### **The Power of God's Promise: The Example of Abraham (6:13-15)**

Once again, the author takes us back into the Old Testament, this time to the story of Abraham in Genesis 22. If you're familiar with that story, you'll remember how God had told Abraham to leave his country and family and go to a land he will show him. And in this call, God promised to make of him a great nation, and to bless him and make his name great, to bless all the families of the earth through him (Gen. 12:1-3).

Now what's remarkable about God's promise to make Abraham into a great nation is that he was already 75 years old and still had no son (Gen. 12:4). We're told back in ch. 11 that his wife, Sarah, was barren—she couldn't have kids (Gen. 11:30). And so much of the story of Abraham is him and Sarah waiting for God to fulfill his promise. Finally, nine chapters and 25 years later, his son Isaac is born. The son through whom Abraham would become a great nation, through whom all nations would be blessed.

And then you get to Genesis 22, where God says to Abraham, “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 one of the mountains of which I shall tell you” (22:1-2). What in the world is that? Why would God promise so much through Isaac, and then just take him away? Well we're told in v. 1 that this is a test. God never actually meant for Abraham to sacrifice his son. He was testing his faith. And Abraham passed the test. Listen to what he says to the young men who accompanied him and Isaac to the mountain: “Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you” (Gen. 22:5). We will worship—offer a sacrifice—and *come back* to you. And he wasn't just saying that so as not to raise suspicion; he truly believed it. As Hebrews 11 explains, “he considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead . . .” (Heb. 11:18). Abraham was faced with two seemingly irreconcilable truths: God promised to make him into a great nation through Isaac, and God commanded him to sacrifice Isaac. If both of those things are true, then God must be planning to raise Isaac from the dead, because I know he's going to keep the first promise. We will worship *and* come back to you.

Abraham demonstrated incredible faith in the promises of God. And God's response to his faith is to reiterate his promise, this time *sealing it with an oath*. A guarantee: “By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore” (Gen. 22:16-17). As the author of Hebrews explains, “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” (Heb. 6:13-15).

So Abraham’s story is an example of the power of God’s promise. He’s the kind of person the author of Hebrews wants us to imitate—one who through faith and patience inherited the promises (6:12). He held fast to God’s word even when it didn’t make sense, even when it took decades to come true. We’re called to imitate that kind of faith as we hold fast to Christ (cf. 6:18).

But what’s interesting, as the author begins to apply the example of Abraham to us in vv. 16-20, it’s not Abraham’s faith that he focuses on. Rather, the overwhelming attention is on the certainty of the promises Abraham trusted in, which we too are called to trust in through Christ. So in other words, this is not so much a call to ratchet up our faith (to try harder to believe); this is a call to reckon with the certainty of God’s promises (to let God convince us that he will do what he says). And that’s what we find in vv. 16-18 . . .

### **The Certainty of God’s Promise: A Double Assurance (6:16-18)**

He starts in v. 16 by explaining how an oath typically functions between people. Because people don’t always keep their word, one way to assure the truthfulness of your promise was to take an oath or to swear by something greater than yourself. It’s the ‘money-back guarantee’ of the ancient world. And the greater the thing you swore by, the more serious you were about your promise. Such that, to swear by God (especially in the ancient world “when people generally feared God), . . . it served to end an argument.”<sup>1</sup> ‘May God strike me down if I don’t keep my word to you.’ If you really believe God will strike you down if you don’t, that’s a pretty good guarantee.

Now of course when God takes an oath, there’s nothing greater than him to swear by (as he says in v. 13). And so he swears by himself. “As I live, says the Lord . . .” He can’t swear by something greater when he’s the greatest thing there is. Nor does God need to swear an oath to validate the reliability of his promise. His promise is fully reliability in and of itself. As v. 18 tells us, it is impossible for God to lie. His promise is good with or without an oath.

But as an accommodation, as an act of compassion, as with Abraham, he meets us where we are in our often wavering faith with a *double assurance*—two unchangeable things: a *promise* sealed with an *oath*. God doesn’t just want us to try harder to believe; he wants to convince us that his word is 100% reliable. As v. 17 puts it, he wants to “show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise”—to us, the offspring of Abraham by faith (cf. Gal. 3:29), we who have sought refuge in him—he wants to show more convincingly “the unchangeable character of his purpose”—that when God says it, he will not change his plan, he will keep his word. So “he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things [his oath and his promise], 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” (6:17-18).

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<sup>1</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 1993, 2015), 178.

God wants to convince us that his plan is sure, that our hope is secure, so that we will have faith to hold fast to the gospel all the way to the end, and so he seals his promise with an oath.

And so what is that promise, and what is that oath? What is the nature of this double assurance he offers? That brings us to vv. 19-20, but also points us to the whole book and really the whole of Scripture.

### **The Nature of God’s Promise: Our Christ-secured Inheritance (6:19-20)**

The promise of God truly does go all the way back to Abraham. God’s “unchangeable purpose” was set in motion millennia ago—really, all the way back to creation, when he made people in his image and blessed them and told them to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. It was a plan and a vision for the whole earth to be filled with the glory of God through children made in his image. And even when human sin and rebellion sought to thwart that purpose, it still remained unchanged, as God renewed it through his promise to Abraham, not only to make him into a great nation, but to bless *all nations* through him—the same purpose he expressed in creation.

It was this promise that ancient Israel looked forward to throughout the entire old covenant. It was this promise that Jesus carried in his heart as he fulfilled that covenant and established God’s kingdom through own his life, death, and resurrection. It’s a promise that Christ fulfills by dealing with sin and making a way for all nations to be reconciled with God. “If you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Gal. 3:29). And so if God has kept his promise to Abraham by sending his Son Jesus Christ to deal with sin and bless all nations and expand the family of God, will he not also keep his promise to bring us safely home into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade (1 Pet. 1:4)? Do we not have confidence to persevere like Abraham, who saw the promise and greeted it from afar (cf. Heb. 11:13)? Not because our faith is so amazing, but because God’s promises are so secure? In Jesus we have a better promise. As one author writes, “Abraham rested his hope in the promise and oath of God; but we have more than that to rest our hope upon: we have the fulfilment of his promise in the exaltation of Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

And if God were only to have given his promise, it would be enough. For it’s impossible for him to lie. But he did more than that—he sealed it with an oath. Specifically, in the author of Hebrews’ mind, an oath that secures Christ’s perpetual and eternal priesthood. Verses 19-20 focus on Christ’s priestly role. And that priesthood is based on an *oath* God swore to David’s son in Psalm 110: “The LORD has *sworn* and will not change his mind, ‘You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek’” (Ps. 110:4; cf. Heb. 7:20-22).

This brings us back into something the author introduced at the end of ch. 5, and then decided that he couldn’t elaborate on it further without first warning his readers to grow up and pay attention—how Christ’s priesthood comes not from Aaron and the old covenant, but something more ancient and enduring—the order of Melchizedek. He still wants to go there with them, though, and he’s about to in ch. 7. And I think that’s why he brings up God’s oath in our passage—he’s moving toward the significance of the oath he made in promising David that his son would not only be a king, but an eternal priest. As he says later in ch. 7:20, this priesthood

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<sup>2</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Rev. Ed. (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 154-155.

was established “not without an oath. For those who formerly became priests were made such without an oath, but this one was made a priest with an oath by the one who said to him: ‘The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, “You are a priest forever.”’ This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant” (7:20-22).

Not only is God’s promise to redeem a people for himself through Christ and bring them into his eternal kingdom utterly secure and unchangeable, so is the oath that makes that promise possible, appointing Jesus as our eternal, heavenly high priest. And so he says in 6:19: “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” (6:19-20).

Through Jesus our hope is anchored in heaven. As one author puts it, “our hope, based upon his promises, is our spiritual anchor. . . . ‘we are moored to an immovable object’—and that immovable object is the throne of God himself.”<sup>3</sup> So whatever this world does to God’s people on this earth is of no consequence as to the security of our inheritance in heaven. And nothing this world offers can compare. You can lose your friends for your faith. You can lose your reputation. You can lose sleep waiting on God to act. You can lose your job for your faith. But you cannot lose your place in God’s kingdom—not if Jesus is your Savior, your King, and your High Priest. Not if our hope is anchored to the very throne of God.

Because Jesus is our forerunner. He’s gone there on our behalf to secure our place, to save our seat. It’s not like at the movies where you can lay your jacket across several seats trying to save them for your friends, and then someone comes along and moves your jackets when you’re not look. No, Jesus has gone to prepare a place for his redeemed, and no one and nothing on earth can take that away. Because not only is he our forerunner, he is our eternal advocate, our high priest. As ch. 7 puts it, “he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (7:26). God’s promises in Christ are secure, and offer a steadfast anchor for our souls.

So what do we do with this oath-sealed promise? This double assurance of God’s faithfulness?

### **Our Response to God’s Promise: Hope that Anchors the Soul (6:18, 19)**

The author tells us what our response ought to be in vv. 18-19: God has given us this double assurance, he has sought to overwhelmingly convince us of the truthfulness of his word so that “we who have fled [to him] for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. . . . a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul . . .”

What’s our response to the promises of God in Christ? To grab hold of them and *never let go*.

So when you’re tempted to lose patience waiting on God, remember that his purposes are unchangeable. What he planned, he will accomplish—even if it’s not on our timetable. When you’re brought to a place of honest doubt—am I wasting my time, is this all just a hoax?—remember that it is impossible for God to lie, and that he has already shown his faithfulness in the cross. If God is willing to keep a promise that cost him his very Son, if Christ has already

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<sup>3</sup> F.F. Bruce, 154-155.

paid the price for our inheritance, will he not keep his word to bring us safely home? If you were to put \$25,000 down on a car, you're not going to just forget to pick it up from the dealer. What Christ shed was infinitely more valuable than that; the Lord will not leave us on the lot. He will keep his word.

When you're ready to give in, give up, or let go, remember that in Christ we have an inheritance that will never perish, spoil, or fade, kept in heaven for us who are being guarded by faith for a salvation ready to be revealed at the last time (1 Pet. 1:3-5). And there is no substitute on earth that can compare, nothing this world can offer that truly lasts or satisfies. There is no greater treasure than Christ.

When you feel abandoned or alone, remember that Christ your forerunner is already saving your seat in heaven. When you are overcome with guilt and shame, you feel like you've just blown it one too many times, remember that Christ your high priest is at the right hand of the Father *in this very moment*, pleading his blood for you. Your very name is graven on the palm of his hand (cf. Isa. 49:16). Think about that—have you ever written yourself a note on your hand when you can't find paper but need to remember something? God has written your name on his hand, so that as he sees it, he thinks of you.

God's promises in Christ are secure. They are a steadfast anchor for our weary souls. Are you convinced? Are you willing to put the full weight of your hope exclusively in Christ? Are you going to hold on tight all the way to the end? It's not about trying harder to ratchet up our faith. It's about reckoning with and being utterly convinced of the absolute credibility of his promises.

By the grace of God may it be so among us.