

## ***God's Assurance, Our Hope***

Hebrews 6:13-20

Sooner or later each of us here today will face a situation that seems completely hopeless. When I say “hopeless,” I mean that there’s little chance that the situation is going to get better. The situation may involve your marriage, your children, your health, your finances, your reputation, or any number of things. Some of you here today are in the middle of such hopeless situations.

When we find ourselves in such situations, what will give us the energy and the will to keep trusting God anyway? What will keep us from becoming so disheartened by our circumstances that we basically quit trusting God? When the disappointment and the stress and the pain of hopelessness gets intense, the temptation is to revert back to “the old way of life” instead of trusting God. For you, the old way of life might involve any number of things: some people revert back to being a control freak; some people revert to numbing the pain through alcohol, drugs, sex, entertainment, etc.; other people go back to a life of bitterness and cynicism and anger.

We’re in the midst of a study in the book of Hebrews. Today’s passage, Hebrews 6:13-20, explains that in Jesus Christ we have a hope that is “sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil” (6:19). This hope is as certain as God Himself. The author is going to argue that the hope we have in Jesus trumps any hopelessness we might experience in specific circumstances in this life. This hope will allow us to trust God instead of reverting back to some inferior way of living.

Hebrews was written to Jewish believers who were becoming hopeless. They were tired of being persecuted for their faith (10:32ff); they were tired of dealing with their own sin (12:4ff); they were “growing weary and losing heart” (Hebrews 12:3). In many ways it would have been much easier for them to simply return to their old way of life (which was old covenant Judaism). At the end of the passage we studied last week, the author challenged them in this way (Hebrews 6:11-12):

11 And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, 12 so that you will not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

In the following paragraph, Abraham will be held forth as someone to imitate. He faced about the most hopeless situation I can imagine (he was commanded to sacrifice his son Isaac) and still trusted God. He had a deeper hope that allowed him to trust God when everything seemed lost.

If you’re facing some type of hopeless situation right now, I trust that today’s passage will encourage you to walk with God anyway. If you’re not really facing anything too hopeless in your life right now, I’d encourage you not to “check out.” There will come a day when you’ll need the perspective of this passage. As Philip Yancey put it, you need to “weave the parachute before you jump out of the plane.” You shouldn’t wait until

you're in a free fall to begin thinking about how you're going to land safely. Today's passage can help you.

***God's Double Assurance to Abraham (Hebrews 6:13-16)*** These verses describe an incident in the life of Abraham which serve as a template for our "faith and patience" (and ultimately our hope). Verses 13 and 14 describe how God gave Abraham a double assurance that He would bless and multiply him.

13 For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, 14 saying, "I will surely bless you and I will surely multiply you."

The quote in verse 14 is taken from Genesis 22:17. Genesis 22 describes how God told Abraham to take his son Isaac to the land of Moriah and sacrifice him as a burnt offering on a mountain there. In some ways God couldn't have made a more difficult, unreasonable demand of Abraham. **First**, this command seems to contradict the very character of God because He is on record that he abhors child sacrifice (see Deut. 12:31, Ezek. 16:20-21, Jer. 7:31, etc.); and yet here he tells Abraham to offer up his son as a burnt offering. Occasionally God commanded people to do things that were counter-intuitive (e.g., Gideon commanded to go to battle with relatively few soldiers), but this was off-the-charts.

Second, Isaac was the son of promise. Many years earlier when God called Abraham to leave his own country and relocate to Canaan, He promised to make Abraham "a great nation" and that "in you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Gen. 12:1-3). God restated this promise in subsequent years by telling Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the dust of the earth (13:16) or the stars in the sky (15:5). The problem was that Abraham and Sarah were getting older and older without being able to conceive a child. But when Sarah was 90 years old (Abraham was 100), she gave birth to Isaac in direct fulfillment of God's promise. And so years later when God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, it seemed as if God were sabotaging His own plan to bless and multiply Abraham.

Abraham found himself in a hopeless, brutal situation (like some of you). But he trusted God anyway; he set out to obey God even though he didn't know what would happen. Genesis 22 describes how Abraham built an altar out of wood, bound Isaac, laid him on the altar, and stretched out his hand to slay him. Before the knife could fall, an angel of the Lord called out from heaven and called out, "Abraham, Abraham!" and told him not to harm Isaac. God confirmed that Abraham "feared Him" because he hadn't withheld his only son (22:12). After God provided a ram to substitute as a sacrifice for Isaac, God spoke again from heaven. This is why the author of Hebrews points out that God "swore by Himself."

16 . . . "By Myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, 17 indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their

enemies. 18 In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.”

In light of this account in Genesis 22, the author of Hebrews points out in verses 13 and 14 that “when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying, ‘I will surely bless you and I will surely multiply you.’” God gave Abraham double assurance: He made the promise and He confirmed it with an oath.

Remember from verse 12 that the author encourages us “to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.” In verse 15 he explicitly (verbally) says that Abraham embodied this way of living his life.

15 And so, having patiently waited, he obtained the promise.

Abraham and Sarah waited patiently for 25 years before Isaac was born. As some of you know, that’s a long time to struggle with infertility. Even as he prepared Isaac to be sacrificed, Abraham waited patiently on God; somehow he believed that God would do what He had promised. It’s interesting that Hebrews 11 speaks in ultimate terms and emphasizes that people like Abraham lived by faith but “did **not** receive what was promised” (11:13, 39). Ultimately, the promise to Abraham was fulfilled through the death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus Christ. When the author says here in 6:15 that Abraham “obtained the promise,” he’s speaking of the birth and restoration of Isaac which foreshadowed the ultimate fulfillment of the promise through Jesus. Abraham serves as an example of someone to imitate because “having patiently waited, he obtained the promise.”

In verse 16 the author makes an observation about the function of an oath in human legal systems.

16 For men swear by one greater *than themselves*, and with them an oath *given* as confirmation is an end of every dispute.

In ancient Israel the most solemn oath involved “swearing by the Lord, the God of heaven and earth” (see Genesis 24:3, 21:23-24, etc.). In essence a person was saying, “May God Himself judge me if I don’t keep my word.” You would swear by someone greater than yourself to confirm that what you were saying was true. This is reflected in our legal system. Before someone testifies in a court of law, s/he is typically asked, “Do you solemnly swear or affirm that you will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, **so help you God?**” We swear by someone greater than ourselves to bind us to the truth.

Since there is no one greater than God, when He wanted to make an oath to Abraham He swore by Himself. This confirmed to Abraham that God would do what He promised. God confirmed to Abraham that “all the nations of the earth shall be blessed” through his descendant.

Remember that Abraham is being put forward as someone to imitate because he “ran the race with endurance”; “through faith and patience he obtained the promise.” When his circumstances were hopeless, he still trusted God. Beginning in verse 17 the author explains that we should respond to **our** circumstances the way Abraham responded to **his** circumstances. The author doesn’t merely imply that there are parallels between our circumstances and his (although that’s true). And he doesn’t imply that our situations will have a “happy ending” or favorable resolution. The author **does** say that the promise and the oath made to Abraham were also made to us.

Verses 17-20 explain:

**God’s Double Assurance to Us (Hebrews 6:17-20)** The New Testament boldly declares that the promise made to Abraham was fulfilled in Jesus Christ and that those who trust in Jesus Christ are “children of Abraham” and “heirs of the promise” (Galatians 3:29, Hebrews 2:16, 6:17; cf. Genesis 22:17-18). That’s why the author of Hebrews can write what he does in verses 17 and 18.

17 In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, 18 so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us.

Notice in verse 17 that he describes believers in Jesus Christ as “heirs of the promise.” That designation emphasizes that in Christ **we are the ones who inherit everything promised** to Abraham. Here the author of Hebrews points out that God wants **us** to understand - even more than He wanted Abraham to understand - that His purposes haven’t changed: He still wants to bless us through Abraham’s descendant, Jesus Christ.

In verse 18 the author mentions “two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie.” I think he’s talking about the same two things he mentioned back in verse 13: His **promise** and His **oath** to Abraham. Since God never lies (Numbers 23:19, 1 Samuel 15:29), we can be certain that we will experience the blessing promised in Christ Jesus.

There is a detail in verse 18 that suggests a mindset for those who want to experience hope in this life. There the author describes us as “we who have taken refuge.” Those who believe in Jesus are **refugees**. In the Old Testament, God commanded Israel to set up cities of refuge (see Numbers 35). If you killed someone unintentionally, you could flee to a city of refuge. There you would be safe from those who wanted to take revenge on you before you could have a fair trial. A refugee is helpless and defenseless and desperate. A refugee needs hope.

In our day, all too often we see pictures and videos of refugee camps. We see people who’ve been forced to leave their homes and jobs and land because of war or famine or floods or earthquakes. Such refugees are essentially helpless; they find themselves at the mercy of those who can give them food and shelter and protection.

The author of Hebrews uses that imagery to describe our condition before God. A genuine Christian isn't someone who's so together and so competent that s/he doesn't really need anything from God. No, that's a Pharisee. A genuine Christian is someone who understands and admits, "I can't wash away my sin. I can't make my life work in my own power. I can't through force of will make relationships healthy and whole. I can't defend myself. I can't meet my own needs. Because I am *that* desperate, I flee for refuge to the One who *can* do all these things." The Psalms mention taking refuge in God forty times (e.g., Psalm 31:1, 141:8). Do you think of yourself as a refugee - as someone who is desperate for God's protection and provision? If we don't think of ourselves as refugees, we won't flee to God for refuge and we won't look for our hope in Him.

The author says that because of God's double guarantee, those who have taken refuge in God "have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us." In the Bible, "hope" is basically *confidence* about the *future*. If you have hope, you are confident about the future in some way. Here the author speaks of "the hope set before us." He's talking about the promise that in Christ we will inherit everything that His death, resurrection, and exaltation accomplished. Verses 19 and 20 elaborate and tell us that our hope/confidence is that we will eventually follow Jesus into the heavenly holy of holies.

19 This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a *hope* both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, 20 where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

The hope we're discussing isn't merely a wish. This hope we have is "an anchor of the soul." Like an anchor that keeps a ship from drifting off, our confidence in Jesus gives us stability in this life: our hope is "both sure and steadfast." When we find ourselves in situations like Abraham's and we have no idea how things are going to work out, our hope is rock solid because God doesn't lie. We have this confidence that He will deliver what He's promised.

The author says that this hope "enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us." In the temple in Jerusalem, the veil was a thick cloth over the entrance to the holy of holies. The high priest "entered within the veil" once a year on the Day of Atonement. Our confidence is that we will one day enter within the veil permanently; we will spend eternity in the very presence of God Himself.

We have this confidence because "Jesus has entered [within the veil] as a forerunner for us." The term "forerunner" signifies that all along Jesus intended to provide a way for us to join Him within the veil. In John 14 Jesus addressed His disciples' anxiety and fear in light of His announcement that He was leaving them and going to the Father (13:33). Jesus told them that He was going "to prepare a place for them" (14:2) and that "I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also" (14:3). Our ultimate hope is that we will make it safely within the veil.

At the end of verse 20 the author returns to a concept he'd introduced in chapter 5 - that of Jesus being a high priest "according to the order of Melchizedek." We'll see next week from chapter 7 how Jesus' priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek points to His superiority as our high priest.

Based on this passage, my encouragement to each of us is to see our hopeless situations in light of the ultimate hope we have in Christ. Here's one way to think about it. . . Envision a timeline that stretches from eternity past to eternity future. Our time here on earth is merely a "dot" on that timeline. Even though this life seems long and tortured at times, our time on earth is merely a dot. Today's passage tells us that our confidence/hope about eternity future should affect the way we live the dot.

People who take hold of the hope set before them - really believing that we'll join Jesus in the presence of God - are able to have a type of heroic faith when things seem hopeless. With this type of hope and this type of faith you don't have to pretend that things are great when they're really not. You can face the reality that not everybody is healed, not every relationship survives, not every problem is solved. As Larry Osborne points out, "As far as we know, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego are the only people who have ever emerged from a furnace unscathed." People with the hope we're talking about face that reality honestly and still trust God..

I talked with several people this week who embody what I've been describing this morning - people who have fled to God for refuge in some rather hopeless situations. Their circumstances have left them helpless and desperate and vulnerable (like refugees). Instead of losing heart and giving up, they are clinging to God in hope. And they are consequently experiencing an amazing amount of grace because God never rejects those who take refuge in Him. He is a father to the fatherless. He binds up the brokenhearted.