

HEBREWS VERSE BY VERSE - The New and Living Way - Part twenty-six

Sunday, September 3rd, 2017 - 10 a.m. - Teaching #1988

Pastor Don Horban - Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

A SURE AND STEADFAST ANCHOR FOR YOUR SOUL

Hebrews 6:13-20 - "For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, [14] saying, "Surely I will bless you and multiply you." [15] And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. [16] For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. [17] 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 might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. [19] We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, 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."

At the end of the swearing in of every president of the United States you will hear the incoming president, after repeating the duties of protecting, preserving and defending the constitution of the United States, close his or her remarks with the all-important phrase, "**So help me, God.**"

Whether or not the incoming leader actually cares about the help of God is open to debate. But that particularly famous phrase does open up an interesting question related to today's text because this is a text all about oaths and swearing faithfulness to promises made.

So here's the strange issue of this text. When God swears He is going to do something it doesn't make sense for Him to say, "**So help me God,**" because He *is* God. There's no one else to offer Him help in anything. And yet that seems to be the *nature* of taking any kind of oath. In court many people "**Swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.**" And when they do that they frequently place their hand on the Bible. Which is another way of saying, "**So help me God,**" because God, it seems assumed, is the *Author* of that special oath affirming book.

The point here is oath taking and swearing truthfulness seem to require something higher and more reverent than the person taking the oath. And God can't possibly do that. So what's going on in today's text? That's the issue we're considering today.

1) HOW MUCH DOES MY WALK WITH JESUS DEPEND ON MY KNOWLEDGE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT?

One might hastily conclude the *reading* of the Old Testament has little to do with vital New Testament contemporary Christian experience. So many portions of Chronicles and Leviticus feel void of spiritual life and practical help of any kind.

But remember the link between today's text and these preceding verses from our last study in - **Hebrews 6:11-12** - "**And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, [12] so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.**"

The idea here is *sluggishness* must be resisted. And the *way* it's to be resisted is through being "**imitators of those who through faith and practice inherit the promises**" (12). Those two concepts are linked together in the very same single verse, so they're *intended* to be seen as *problem* ("sluggishness") and *remedy* ("imitators of those who through faith inherit the promises").

But who shall we imitate? Can we just pick our role models at random? Will rappers and pop stars and academy award winners do the trick? No. Our text points our attention in a very specific direction and the direction is the **Old Testament**. Our writer assumes a working knowledge of the major players - in this case **Abraham**. Imitate Abraham to avoid spiritual sluggishness.

That's incredibly striking. There's something we're being called to consider in these words. The New Testament completes and fulfills the Old, to be sure. But it still needs to be remembered that a full *appreciation* of the New Covenant requires understanding the *lessons* God was revealing in the Old. He gave us centuries of revelation *making way* for the full appreciation of the New Covenant in all its glory.

The whole New Testament *assumes* a working knowledge of the Old Testament. Examples and warnings and personalities are mentioned constantly - over and over again - frequently on the lips of Jesus. These two testaments are *designed* to be read together. A *plot line* is being formed. And the *ending* is seen in its deepest meaning when we understand how the divine plan *got there*.

2) GOD'S OATH TO ABRAHAM AND WHAT IT HAS TO DO WITH US

Hebrews 6:13-15 - "For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, [14] saying, "Surely I will bless you and multiply you." [15] And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise."

There are several times when God made the promise of an heir to Abraham. But there's a particular reference point for this text.

And the clue is in that phrase, “...**he swore by himself...**” (13). There is one particular time those words were spoken to Abraham and the context is packed with meaning:

Genesis 22:12-18 - “He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” [13] And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. [14] So Abraham called the name of that place, “The LORD will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.” [15] And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven [16] and said, “***By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, [17] 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. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, [18] and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.***”

This oath is a repetition of the earlier promise to Abraham in **Genesis 12:2-3** - “**And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. [3] I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.**”

Just **how** all the nations of the earth would be blessed through Abraham was expanded in the wording of the same promise in **Genesis 15:4-5** - “**And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.” [5] And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”**

The important words are, “...**your very own son shall be your heir...**” (4). Remember, every hope for the fulfillment of God’s promise for Abraham’s descendants hung on his son, **Isaac**. And yet Isaac was the one Abraham was called upon to offer in sacrifice. God’s plan - God’s **promise** - was unraveling before Abraham’s eyes. All he had looked forward to in anticipation of God’s work on his behalf was now going to be an impossibility.

And we’re told to **consider** Abraham. Our writer of Hebrews holds him up as an **example** - as one who these Christians are to “**imitate**” (6:12). He had the promise of God and then there was real life. And the two weren’t lining up. Does that sound familiar?

Please think this issue all the way through. We all have problems, to be sure. But we’re told to consider and imitate Abraham for another reason than just the fact that life can be challenging at times. For Abraham the issue isn’t just coping with life’s problems. The issue is the **cutting off of all future hope**. Everything hinged on the promised seed - Isaac. **This promise** was supposed to happen.

And here we all sit this morning. We have promises from God. We have expectations and hopes. And we’re told to consider Abraham because sooner or later his experience will be ours - “**This** is what I was banking on. **This** was supposed to work.” You fill in the blanks. No matter what it was supposed to be, you know when the bottom feels like it’s falling out. It’s not some small problem like we all face in life. It’s how you see your **future being one of joy**. And right now you can’t see your way out. Things have stopped making sense.

That’s where this text comes in. Imitate Abraham when what you consider essential for your future joy doesn’t appear secure or even possible. Imitate Abraham when, unlike the other difficulties that come along in life, you have gradually come to the place where you can’t summon hope to go on. **That’s** the issue of this text.

This is where these Jewish Christians - those first readers of this letter to the Hebrews - found themselves. Their Christian faith was as precious to them as yours is to you. They felt the same joy of forgiveness and eternal life - the same release from religious dead works that couldn’t change the heart. Suddenly they were divinely rescued by a graciously redeeming, sinner-seeking, abundant life-giving God.

Now suddenly this faith was costing family and friends and homes. It was the cause of the loss of all income and earthly security. It brought instead persecution and imprisonment. It looked like their hope was fading and failing. It suddenly looked like they had been wrong all along.

It’s a lot easier to sing those great phrases, “**I have decided to follow Jesus - The cross before me, the world behind me,**” when everyone else in the room is singing the same song. But when the path you’re on **feels** like it’s going the wrong way - when the very things you held the most dear - the very things that seemed to offer the brightest future - like **Abraham’s son Isaac** - when **those** things are cut off - when the lights of life start to dim - then it can be easier to say, “**What’s the use?**” than “**I have decided to follow Jesus.**”

Make no mistake. “**Dullness of hearing**” (5:11) and **spiritual “sluggishness”** (6:12) have roots. And our writer, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, connects two things brilliantly in this text. He ties together the command to **consider Abraham and the apparent loss of covenant hope through Isaac** and then compares that with **God’s oath of commitment to secure our hope in the finished work of Christ.** That’s where our study is going now.

Hebrews 6:16-20 - "For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. [17] 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 might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. [19] We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, 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."

There is so much in these verses. And we should start by noting this is the only place in the entire Bible where that verb "**guaranteed**" is used - "**...he guaranteed it with an oath...**" (17). And we're immediately made aware there is something important being said. These verses enforce the idea of God's trustworthiness with "**...two unchangeable things...**" (18). Those **two** things are God's **promise** and God's **oath**.

And when I read that my mind asks why in the world isn't God's promise enough? Some people don't even think it right for Christians to take an oath. And here's **God** taking one! Surely there is no need for an absolutely faithful, truthful God to back up a promise with an oath. God is very good at **keeping** His promises. So why an oath?

Certainly **God** doesn't need this oath. He knows what He's doing and saying and has omnipotent power to do it. God is very sure of Himself.

We, however, need all the assurance we can get. You will notice we're all described as **refugees** in this text - **Hebrews 6:18** - "**...we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement...**"

That title shouldn't surprise us if we've been thinking about this whole letter of Hebrews carefully. The **refugee** image ties right back into the earlier descriptions and warnings we've studied. This is our writer's way of reminding his Christian readers of all those references to the **wilderness generation** and their **failure to enter into the promised land** in **Hebrews 3 and 4**.

And their terrible mistake was the way they persistently sought their permanent hope and refuge **outside God's promised land rest** - **Hebrews 3:14-17** - "For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. [15] As it is said, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion." [16] For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? [17] And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness?"

These refugees left Egypt with Moses but forgot they were never en route to settle anywhere in the wilderness. They forgot they left Egypt with only **one destination** in mind - the promised land. All of God's highest intentions for them could never be fulfilled anywhere else.

And so our writer of Hebrews reminds Christian readers they too are **refugees**. If they try to **settle** anywhere outside of God's fullest destination for their lives they will find themselves trapped in the worst kind of self-deception. They will try to make **home** what God never intended to be home.

This is where those deep words of promise come into play for all of us today - **Hebrews 6:19-20** - "**We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, 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."

Don't miss the central issue in these two verses. God gives all of us many good things. We ask for daily bread and God is gracious. But the central issue of this text, and the central issue in our lives, is the **placement of our ultimate hope** - "**We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope...**" (19).

And then our writer tells us the **destination** of this hope. It's a hope that **follows Jesus** - **a hope that is anchored where he has gone** - "**...a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner...**" (20).

O, the fatigue of trying to squeeze **eternal hope** from **present blessings!** Your deepest disappointments will always reveal the root of your greatest joy. Every earthly security is as solid as a mist. That's why this text tells us God actually **took an oath** - all by Himself - just to give us **double confidence** that nothing shaken on this earthly scene can de-stabilize the deepest anchor of our soul.