

“God Made a Promise”

The Ninth in a Series on the Epistle to the Hebrews

Texts: Hebrews 6:13-20; Genesis 22:1-19

The contrast could not be greater. The Psalmist says of the human race—“all people are liars” (Psalm 116:11). Yet the author of Hebrews tells us that “it is impossible for God to lie” (Hebrews 6:18). Our track record is so-so at best when it comes to keeping our promises. But God cannot lie. When he makes a promise, he will keep it. He must keep it because he is truth itself. In fact, the entire Christian faith and the gospel depend upon this very point. God promises to save sinners who trust in Jesus Christ. This is why the gospel is “good news,” because salvation is of the Lord and grounded in his sacred oath. And this is why the author of Hebrews reminds the struggling church to which he is writing that gospel they have believed is grounded in God’s unshakable promise, and is not grounded upon human faithfulness, good works, or in our ability to keep our promises. God made a promise. He will keep that promise and the work of Jesus Christ is the proof.

As we continue our series on the Book of Hebrews, we pick up where we left off last time with Hebrews 6:1-12—the author’s stern warning not to turn away from Jesus Christ or else suffer eternal consequences. But that warning is not the end of the author’s overall argument. So, we will do a very brief bit of review before we turn to the specifics of our text (verses 13-20 of chapter six).

The author of Hebrews has spent the first five chapters of this remarkable book making a powerful case for the superiority of Jesus Christ. The author has shown us from the pages of the Old Testament that Jesus is superior to angels, Moses, and the priests of Israel. The reason why the unknown author of this epistle has made this impressive case is because the church to which he is writing is facing a serious crisis. Many of the members of this congregation who were reading/hearing this letter were likely recent converts to Christianity from Judaism. Yet many of these same converts were facing intense persecution from civil authorities, or from the Jewish community they had left behind. Because of this pressure, a number of the members of this church renounced their faith in Jesus, and had returned to the synagogue.

Since Jesus Christ as creator and redeemer is superior to all things, the author exhorts the members of this church to grow to maturity, and to know what they believe and why. They must not neglect the great salvation accomplished for them by Jesus Christ. But the author also warns them of the need to persevere to the end of their lives in faith. Apostasy is a serious sin with grave consequences, and cannot be taken lightly. However, the author of Hebrews never gives warnings, or issues threats of covenant curses without at the same time giving his readers a reason to persevere, and showing them a better way. So, after issuing his warning in the first half of chapter six, at the end of the chapter the author reminds these struggling Christians of the glorious nature of God’s covenant promise to his people, a promise grounded in his own divine authority and truthfulness—in other words, his sacred oath.

As we have seen throughout our study of this letter, context is everything. In verses 1-12 of chapter 6, the author warned these people about the consequences of apostasy—denying that the death of Jesus is sufficient to save us from the wrath of God, and demanding that God judge us according to our works, or our obedience to God’s commandments. But the stern warning is followed by a wonderful promise. And just as is the case with the warning regarding apostasy, the author’s discussion of the great covenant promise God made to Abraham likewise takes place against the backdrop of his five chapter argument for the superiority of Jesus Christ. You cannot talk about why apostasy is such a serious sin, if you are not

clear about what God has done in Jesus Christ to save us from our sins. In the same way, God's covenant promise cannot be fully appreciated apart from the person and work of Christ, whose promise it was that Abraham believed even though that promise was couched in the types and shadows of the Old Testament. We must keep this context in mind as we proceed to the end of the chapter.

As we have seen in our study of this epistle, the unknown author of this epistle probably comes from the Pauline circle, and is writing to this small and persecuted church (likely in Rome or Alexandria). To make his case for the superiority of Jesus Christ, the author frequently quotes from a number of familiar portions of the LXX, demonstrating that the Old Testament Scriptures foretold of Jesus Christ, Israel's priest and king, who is the Son of God as well as the creator and sustainer of all things. The author has shown us that the death of Jesus renders us perfect because Jesus' death turns aside the wrath of God. He has also shown his readers that because Jesus suffered and was tempted in all ways as are we, our high priest sympathizes with us in all of our weaknesses. The author's main point so far is this—Jesus is not just **a** great high priest, he is **the** great high priest. And this superiority and supremacy of Jesus Christ is the foundation for everything which follows—for God always keeps his promises in Jesus Christ.

As we turn to our text, Hebrews 6:13-20, the author moves from warning the members of this church about the serious consequences of apostasy, to reminding this struggling church of the certainty of God's covenant promise.

Before we look at the details of our text however, we need to take a bit of a detour. This particular section of the Book of Hebrews is especially relevant to us now that the political season is upon us and politicians are barking all over the landscape. As you know, it is my policy not to address political issues from the pulpit. But when politicians make erroneous theological claims (and happen to be professing Christians), we need to correct them. One of most common errors of our day is when a politician (usually an evangelical, and usually a Republican) invokes covenant promises which God made to his people Israel under the Old Covenant (which were given in a very specific redemptive-historical context), and then applies these promises to modern secular nations such as the United States. The problem is that the United States has no redemptive covenant with God. Nor does the modern nation of Israel.

So, we commonly hear politicians claiming that the United States is a Christian nation (it is better described as a religious nation), and because of this we are biblically obligated to support the modern secular nation of Israel (especially as to the defense of its borders). Sadly, the politicians are merely echoing a score of Christian preachers and prophecy pundits who make the same mistaken claim. This position is widely held among conservative evangelicals, as well as social conservatives, and in many circles this view is made to be both a political and theological test of one's orthodoxy. In other words, if you don't support Israel, then you are an anti-Semite who doesn't take the Bible seriously.

As we will see, this assumption is just plain wrong. In fact, the author of Hebrews addresses this very point in our text this morning and it is important that we understand him correctly. We have all heard politicians and preachers of every stripe invoke the covenant promise God made to Abraham in Genesis 12, "*I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you,*" and then apply that covenant promise to American foreign policy. Those nations and individuals who support the nation of Israel will be blessed, those who do not will be cursed. Talk about taking a text out of its context!

Whether or not the American president and our congress support the modern secular nation of Israel is an important foreign policy question, no doubt. We are all entitled to our opinions about this policy. But let us be perfectly clear here—whether or not the United States supports Israel is a *political* question. The

Bible does not apply the covenant promise to the modern nation of Israel, but to the spiritual children of Abraham, those individuals who believe God's covenant promises. In other words, the covenant promise is made to the people of God who believe the promise God made to Abraham as spelled out here by the author of Hebrews. It is therefore a covenant promise tied to redemptive history and the saving work of Jesus Christ. It is not a conditional promise made to modern nations to the effect that if they support the secular state of Israel, God will bless them, and if they don't, God will curse them.

This will become clear when we take a closer look at our text. There are two main themes in this section. One is the unshakable nature of God's promise—God has sworn on his oath to provide certain blessings for his people. The other is the example of Abraham, who patiently waited to receive the promised inheritance. In these two elements we see the objective side of things (God's promise) and the subjective side (our response to that promise). God speaks and acts, and then we respond by trusting in God's promise. After all, this is the very essence of faith (biblically understood). Faith is trust in God's promise. In chapter 11, the author of Hebrews himself will define faith as follows: *“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”*

Having warned the congregation of the gravity of giving up on trusting God's promise to save sinners and instead seeking to be judged by one's works (the theological point underlying the decision made by those in this church to give up on Christianity and return to Judaism), the author now lays out the nature of the promise God made to Abraham. That covenant promise was not fulfilled in the ministry of Moses and the giving of the law. That promise was fulfilled in the doing and dying of Jesus Christ, who, as the author has made plain, is superior to Moses because he is the mediator of a better covenant—that covenant God made with Abraham which is now fulfilled in Jesus Christ (i.e., the covenant of grace).

In verses 13-14, the author reminds this church that the gospel itself is grounded in the promise God made to Abraham. The gospel is not grounded in the law God revealed to Moses (and Israel). Thus we read, *“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.’”* It is not an accident that the last of the Old Testament prophets, John the Baptist, warned Israel that with the coming of Jesus Christ, Jews need to realize that a true child of Abraham doesn't need a genealogical chart to prove their Jewish ancestry, but that they must believe that God is fulfilling his promise through the coming of the Messiah.¹ In Matthew 3:9, John warns the Sadducees and Pharisees who had come to witness his baptizing, *“do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.”* The promise is not tied to bloodlines or ancestry, but to trust (faith) in God's work in saving sinners.

The fact that anyone (Jew or Gentile) who believes in Jesus is identified as a child of Abraham becomes one of the central themes of the New Testament and is the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises that all who call upon the name of the Lord (even Gentiles), will be saved (i.e. Joel 2:32). And as we will see next time, Lord willing, when we take up chapter 7, God's promise was made to Abraham explains the author's interest in Melchizedek, the mysterious priest of Salem to whom Abraham paid tithes, and who possesses a significant priesthood in his own regard.

The passage which the author cites in verse 14 is Genesis 22:16 ff., (part of our Old Testament lesson this morning). This verse reiterates the earlier promise God made to Abraham in Genesis 12 when

¹ Bruce, Hebrews, 152.

Abraham was old and childless and still without an heir. *“Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 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. 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.’”* In Genesis 22, the promise of blessing is made to Abraham after he obeyed the Lord's command to sacrifice his son Isaac, the very one through whom the promise of Genesis 12 and countless descendants was to be fulfilled.

Not only did Abraham believe God's promise as stated in Genesis 12, but after that promise was fulfilled through the birth of Isaac, some twenty-five years later Abraham was still willing to do what God commanded him to do. Abraham had witnessed God's faithfulness in keeping his promises, and so Abraham did as God commanded and took Isaac up the Mount and raised the knife over his son before God interceded and provided another sacrifice—a ram. And so as the author of Hebrews puts it in verse 15, *“and thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise.”* Abraham's heir was born (Isaac), and even though the fulfillment of the promise remained to be realized in the generations yet far off in the future, in the birth of Isaac, Abraham now knew that his descendants would indeed be too many to number. He waited and he obtained what was promised. In doing this, Abraham is indeed set out as an example of someone of great faith, and one whom God's people are to follow in trusting in God's promise to save his people from the guilt and power of their sin.

It was common in the ancient world (as it is in our own) to swear an oath by appealing to some greater power than ourselves as a guarantee that we are telling the truth. In verse 16, the author reminds us that this has long been the case. *“For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation.”* When you swear an oath in God's name, you are invoking God's judgment upon yourself if what you declare under oath isn't true. Swearing “to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth” and then lying is not to be taken lightly. To do so is to mock God.

So when God makes a promise on oath he swears that oath in his own name and by his own authority because there is no higher authority than himself! As we read in verses 16-18, *“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, 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.”* In these verses the focus switches from Abraham's example to the nature of God's promise. God's promise is true because his purpose does not change and because God cannot lie. The promise is grounded in God's oath, not in Abraham's response (faith).

There are a number of important points made here which serve as the foundation for the trustworthiness of God's word, the truth of his gospel promise, as well as revealing to us something about God's divine nature. The first thing to consider is that God's covenant promises are tied to his unchanging purposes and nature. God does not react to what he sees his creatures doing—as in the old sermon illustration used to explain away predestination. “Our lives are like a movie God has already seen.” God has decreed from all eternity to save his people based upon his unchanging nature and purpose. He can do nothing else. God decrees everything which comes to pass, and then executes that decree in time and space (history).

The specific way God has chosen to relate to his people is through the various covenants we find in the Bible. God has made certain promises and these promises are fulfilled in ordinary human history—this is why we repeatedly speak of “redemptive history,” which is the record of God's decrees and promises

coming to pass in the lives of historical people and events in Scripture. If these things did not happen then the Bible is not true nor trustworthy. If these things did not happen then God is lying, and he is not worthy of our trust or faith. It would be like someone openly lying under oath in a court. How can you believe anything they say if they can't tell the truth under oath?

This fact alone changes how we understand the Bible. We do not read it to find timeless truths—like *Aesop's Fables*. The Bible is not the “owner's manual to life.” It was not given to make us successful, prosperous, or happy. The sixty-six books of the Bible are written over a span of two thousand years and are the collected record of God keeping his promises. Closely related to this is the fact that covenants are defined as oaths under sanctions. The one swearing the oath must do what he promises to do. If he does, he is blessed, and if he doesn't he is cursed. The blessing/curse principle (obey and receive the promised blessing, disobey and receive the threatened curse), becomes the basis for distinction between the law (what God commands), and the gospel (what God freely gives which meets the demands of the law).

That is why the example of Abraham is so important to the original audience as well as to us. Not so much because Abraham is someone we should seek to emulate (although he is an example of great faith), rather, in the account of Abraham we see God keep his promises and Abraham responds to those promises by believing that God can do what he has promised to do. We are to do what Abraham did, trust God to keep his promises. We do this because in the life of Abraham we witness God fulfill his promises which are grounded in his oath.

The second thing to consider is that the assertion that God cannot lie is the basis for the authority of Scripture (which the biblical writers themselves repeatedly affirm are the very words of God coming to us through the agency of human authors). We are not left to ourselves, to listen to fellow liars speculate about what God is like, why people are basically good and really don't need to be saved. God has spoken in his word. He cannot lie. He fulfills everything he has promised. This is why otherwise obscure figures like Melchizadek make it into the redemptive story alongside major figures like Abraham. Melchizadek is also part of the story of God keeping his promises and accomplishing his purposes. Melchizadek is never held out to us as an example of someone whom we are to emulate.

This, then, is why we must understand the covenant curse in the first half of the chapter (Hebrews 6:4-6). *“For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt”*). Those who claim to trust God's promise to save them in Christ (who is superior to Moses, angels and Israel's priests), but who then walk away by returning to Judaism are, in effect, rejecting God's promise. On top of that, they are insisting that God judge them according to their works. These people are invoking the covenant curse! The contemporary equivalent would be to renounce one's baptism.

This is also how we must understand God's promise in the second half of the chapter—the hope that we have is grounded in God's promise as confirmed in the work of Jesus Christ. God swears to fulfill his promised based on his own authority, then fulfills the promises in his Son, who is superior to all things. There is no higher, or more secure authority than this, and since God cannot lie, nor change his purposes, his promise to us stands. Now the question is “do we (like Abraham) believe those promises, or do we reject those promises and insist that God bless us or curse us based upon our performance?” The apostates had done the latter. We must do the former.

Although many had turned their backs on Christ and returned to the inferior, in verses 19-20 the author of Hebrews reminds those who remained faithful that despite all these difficulties they still face, “*we have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul.*” We possess “*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.*” God made a promise. That promise is fulfilled when Jesus enters the “inner place” (the heavenly temple, of which the earthly tabernacle and Jerusalem temple were types and shadows), fulfilling everything God promised to Abraham and revealed in the priesthood of Melchizedek. Our hope is grounded in what Jesus has done, as the great high priest, for us and in our place. When he ascended into heaven, he entered into the Holy Place because his work of redemption was completed. This is why he is called our forerunner. Because Jesus is there now as our high priest, we have full access to the presence of God, and we have God’s promise that just as Jesus suffered, died, and was raised from the dead, so too, God will ensure that we receive everything he has promised to us, his people. And this is why our hope—God will do what he says he will do—serves as the sure, and steadfast anchor of our souls, no matter what may come about in this present evil age.

What then do we say by way of application?

The first thing to take away is that God made a promise to Abraham, and God fulfills that promise through Jesus Christ. This is why we must look to the doing and dying of Jesus Christ to fully understand the way in which God’s oath stands. We trust God’s promise because we see a bloody cross and an empty tomb. We have a sure and certain anchor in times of storm because the one who died for us and who was raised for our justification, now sits at God’s right hand as our great high priest. This same Jesus who has made us perfect (through his death upon the cross) also sympathizes with us in all our weakness. Those who have returned to Judaism have walked away from all of these glorious promises, and invoke the covenant curses upon themselves. It is all so utterly tragic.

The second thing is to realize that by applying God’s covenant promises to modern nations such as Israel we are ignoring both the context of the promise and the historical record. Under the national covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai, the Israelites were indeed given earthly promises (the land, protection from enemies, fruitful vines, etc.). But these blessings were not an end in themselves, but were designed to point the Israelites to heavenly blessings (i.e., the forgiveness of sin, the righteousness of Christ, eternal life, etc.). This is why God’s people are now children of Abraham, and not children of Moses. Furthermore, as a nation, Israel disobeyed God, did not embrace the promise of salvation made to Abraham, and because of this disobedience was cast from the land of promise, not once, but twice, the last time in the diaspora after Jerusalem was sacked by Rome and the temple was destroyed in 70 AD. With the coming of Jesus Christ, all of these things (the nation and its temple) are rendered obsolete. The earthly promises are designed to point us to the glories which await us in Christ. The earthly promises are not an end in themselves. They point us to Christ and to a better covenant!

So when these promises are seen in strictly geo-political terms, we not only deny that God has already fulfilled them when he gave Israel the land at the time of Joshua and the conquest (something stated in Joshua 21:46), we turn the promise God made to Abraham (“*I will bless those who bless you, and curse those who curse you*”) into a earthly promise with temporal blessings. Make no mistake about it. What is promised here in terms of covenant blessings and curse is ultimately salvation from sin and its consequences. What is promised to Abraham and then to Israel (a land, a people and a nation) is ultimately fulfilled in the merits of Jesus Christ through which God fulfills that promise which he swore to Abraham on his own authority. Beloved, God made a promise. In Jesus Christ, God keeps that promise. And God will bless all those who trust his Son, and he will curse all those who do not.