

“OUR HOPE: JESUS JAMS OPEN THE DOOR”

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Hebrews 6:13-20

For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, ¹⁴saying, “I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply you.” ¹⁵And thus, having patiently waited, he obtained the promise. ¹⁶For men swear by one greater than themselves, and with them an oath given as confirmation is an end of every dispute.

¹⁷In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the Un-changeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, ¹⁸in order that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we may have strong encouragement, we who have fled for refuge in laying hold of the hope set before us.

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

If you were to try to isolate the primary area of your own personal spiritual concern, in all likelihood it could be reduced to two fundamental questions: How do I get through to God?
How do I know it when I’ve done it?

These are primal questions. Central. Foundational. They have been from the beginning. Job, the oldest book in the Bible, raises the urgent question, “*Where is God my Maker, Who gives songs in the night?*” (Job 35: 10b). “*Oh that I knew where I might find Him, that I might come to His seat!*” (23:3).

The ancient Hebrews were harassed by the haunting questions of how one gained access to God and then knew it when it had happened. They were overwhelmed by a feeling of God’s transcendence. His far-offness. His wholly other-ness. They were perennially plagued by the problem of bridging the awesome gap they conceived as existing between themselves and Jehovah. How could they gain access to Him? How could they do so with a sense of assurance

that once in His presence they would be heard?

So, the central questions of your heart and mine are also those of these Hebrew Christians. We're all in the same boat. We want viable answers to our vital askings: How do I get through to God? How do I know it when I've done it?

Why is this so important? So crucial? So foundational? Because, if a person can really know he has access to God any moment of the night or day, and if he can feel assured that when he speaks God listens -- that real communication occurs between them -- any problem of any size can be solved. Or at least be handled creatively. With God's help, anything is possible. The key is getting through to God and knowing it.

It is this primal concern of the human heart to which the writer of Hebrews now directs our attention in a most interesting and intriguing way. Just prior to this (5:12—6:12), he has really been laying the leather to his listeners. You've been playing games with God, he says. You've been toying around with the Christian life. Nibbling at the edges of commitment. Going thus far, but no further. As a result, you've stopped growing. You've fooled with the spiritual ABC's so long, you've become spiritually DEF! God is speaking, but you won't listen. Or, worse yet, can't hear any more. Unless you snap to -- repent -- you're in for a rude awakening when you face Jesus at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

It's a severe rebuke. The warning is extremely solemn. Their spiritual indolence, indifference and immaturity are not laughing matters. These are not attitudes they can casually shrug off. But, being a man with a pastor's heart, the writer of Hebrews is not content to leave it there. Having shaken them to their roots with the severity of his exhortation, he suddenly shifts gears. He switches from bad news to good news. From rebuke to reassurance.

Shortly after I began my first pastorate, a prominent businessman met me at the door one Sunday, "Pastor, I like coming to this church and I may join it. I'm tired of being told what to

do. I know that! The thing I appreciate is that, at long last, someone is trying to tell me how to do it.”

Prior to his comment, I was not conscious of giving a “how to” emphasis to my sermons. But following his comment, I made a deliberate effort to do so, because, as my friend pointed out, most of us know what to do. We’re not stupid or morally insensitive. We know right from wrong. But knowing how to do it, and actually doing it, are where we need some help.

So, it’s to the matter of teaching his readers how to grow in Christ that the writer of Hebrews now turns. “Do you want to grow in the Lord?” he seems to say. “Here’s how to do it. You grow in the Lord by growing in the Lord! Like Abraham of old, you build your faith (and, consequently, your hope) upon the character of God Himself. You grow in the Lord by growing in the Lord!”

This reference to Abraham was especially effective, for those Hebrew Christians remembered that over the years God had made many promises to Abraham (Genesis 13:15; 15:5; 17:4-8; 22:17,18), and He had kept every one of them! Notice this man’s name is spelled “*Abram*” in Genesis, until God changed it in Genesis 17:5 to “*Abraham*,” saying, “*for I will make you the father of a multitude of nations.*” At the same time God changed Sarai’s name to Sarah, saying that she would bear a son and call his name Isaac (Genesis 13:15-19).

Actually, these “extra” promises of God to Abraham were recapitulations, elaborations or clarifications, of His earlier promise to bless Abram and make him a great nation through whom the people of the world would bless themselves (Genesis 12:1-3). In fact, if there is an interpretive key which unlocks our understanding of the entire Biblical narrative, it is the covenant between God and Abram of Ur.

“Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from you father’s house, to the land which I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you,

and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:1-3).

Abram was 75 years old and childless when God made this promise to him (Genesis 12:4). As the years rolled by, it became more and more unlikely that God could ever deliver on this particular commitment. As a matter of fact, Sarai, Abram's wife, made a joke out of the fact that a couple of senior citizens like them were one day going to have overflow crowds at their family reunions (Romans 4:18). But, as the decades went by and Sarai began to realize the seriousness with which Abram took God's promise, she decided to give the Lord a little help. She suggested her husband cohabit with Hagar, one of her maid-servants, and have a child by her.

I've often wondered why Abram succumbed to that particular suggestion. While he was by no means perfect, he was a man of high principles. At one time, I thought it might have been that Hagar was a slick chick decked out in a B.C. version of the miniskirt who posed such an enticement the old boy couldn't handle it. However, when I recalled it was his wife who made this suggestion (knowing wives and the kind of women they'd pick for such an arrangement), I decided "Hag"ar was probably well named! I don't think Sarai was taking any chances!

But, whatever the reason, Abram took the bad advice of his misguided wife. Hagar conceived and bore Ishmael, who has proved to be a thorn in the side of Israel from that day to this. Finally, twenty-five years after God made His promise to Abram, Sarai conceived, and Isaac, the child of promise, was born (Genesis 21:1-3).

As Abram watched this long-awaited son grow into young manhood, he must have scratched his head at times and wondered if God had gotten His wires crossed. Ishmael was so aggressive, while Isaac was hardly the strongest character about which we read in scripture. He was constantly being manipulated. First, by his mother. Later by his wife. Yet, despite these Caspar Milquetoast qualities, Isaac was the child of promise. On him rested the fulfillment of God's prophecy regarding a great nation through whom the people of the world

would bless themselves.

Therefore, the directions God gave to Abraham must have seemed absolutely incredible. *“God tested Abraham, and said to him. . . ‘Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you’”(Genesis 22:1,2).*

When, in complete trust and obedience, Abraham did as he was told, God intervened at the very last moment, a sacrificial ram was provided, Isaac was spared, and the burnt sacrifice proceeded on schedule. At this point, God restated His earlier promise to Abraham, confirming it with a remarkable oath *“‘By Myself I have sworn,’ declares the Lord, ‘because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, 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. And in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice’ (Genesis 22:16-18).*

Now, returning to Hebrews (6:13-20), we see how this all comes together. To get the full picture, we must take into account the earnestness and seriousness with which an oath was held in those days. The easy perjury of our own day was almost unheard of in Biblical times. An oath was the strongest surety a man could give. Usually, he invoked “the higher power” as a witness. If there were any question about the intentions of a person, the moment he swore in the name of the living God, saying such and such were so, that ended it. All speculation about his veracity was over. All doubts and misgivings were laid aside. The issue was settled. The deal was a deal.

With that background in mind, you can imagine the wide-eyed wonder of those who later read of this oath with which God had sealed His promise to Abraham. You can also begin to grasp why it was that they believed with unquestioning certainty that the prophecy regarding Abraham and his seed would be fulfilled.

Actually, of course, the mere fact that God said He would bless Abraham should have been enough. And it really was. His word is His bond. On the human level, though, that isn't always true; consequently, we sometimes have difficulty just accepting and believing God's word.

A number of years ago we had an opportunity to acquire a small cabin on a lovely lake in northern Wisconsin. The seller wanted cash and I was \$5,000 short of being able to give it to him. While praying and thinking about what I might do, I was led to call a man in Chicago who had loaned money to churches on various occasions. I explained my problem to him, offering a first mortgage as collateral if he would loan me \$5,000. He said he would think about it and call me back in a day or two.

A couple of days later when the phone rang, it was my friend, Van Maxson. “John, I've thought a great deal about this matter. You really should have that property. You work hard and take very little time off. You need a quiet place to get away so that the healing force of nature can do its work. But,” he went on, “I've got more first mortgages now than I need. I don't want any more. However, if you'll give me your word, I'll loan you the \$5,000 without collateral!”

Obviously, I was overjoyed. Even more, I was deeply moved by this expression of trust. Later, he accepted a signed note for the benefit of his heirs, were he to die, but no reference was ever made to it. Now, do you think I would renege on that obligation? Never in a million years! I would have sold everything I owned and, if necessary, lived in a tent before I would have failed the kind of trust Van Maxson placed in me.

The comparison is hardly the same, but the point is, God's bare word should have been enough. And, from Abraham's point of view, I think it was. But maybe, remembering the earlier debacle involving Hagar and Ishmael, God decided to shore up Abraham on his weak side. Whatever the reason, on His own initiative, God confirmed His prior promise with an oath! “*Since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself*” (Hebrews 6:13), making His

covenant with Abraham doubly secure. God’s word backed by God’s good name! Two immutable, unchangeable, absolutely certain things. Thus, the issue was settled. The prophecy was dependable. Abraham and his seed were indeed blessed to be a blessing.

For twenty-five years, God’s word and God’s oath were all Abraham had. A quarter of a century passed before Sarah conceived and bore Isaac. Yet, through all this time, the patriarch remained faithful. Why? Because he knew in his heart God could not be untrue to Himself.

That was exactly the point the writer of Hebrews wanted to make. You grow in the Lord by growing in the Lord! You must put your faith in Him. In His person. His promises. His power. Not in any quality or cleverness of your own.

God had promised to do something tremendous through Abraham. “What God promised to do did not depend upon Abraham’s worth, merit, works or conduct,” says M. R. DeHaan, “but upon God’s person, God’s promise and God’s power to keep that promise. Biblical faith always rests in God. Never in itself or in the one who possesses it.”

So, we Christians can be hopeful. Not because of our steadfastness. Our faithfulness. Our cleverness. Our courage. These are not the guarantee of our faith. We are hopeful because behind, in and through it all is the nature and character of God Himself. God, who makes promises and keeps them. “That’s the kind of faith I want you to have,” the writer of Hebrews says, “faith that rests in God.”

Think about Abraham again. He didn’t have faith because he saw immediate results. He had to wait two and a half decades before his son was born. He didn’t have faith because it made sense. It was nonsense to believe a couple of old codgers like Abraham and Sarah would conceive a child (Romans 4). Nor, was Abraham’s faith strong because it was supported by the people around him. His own wife temporarily undermined his faith by giving him some bad advice.

The thing which made Abraham’s faith effective, which kept hope alive, was its rootage in the

nature of God Himself. Without seeing any result for twenty-five years, he clung to the character of God. That's what true faith always does. That's where true faith always rests.

Jane Merchant, a tremendous woman, is the victim of a baffling bone disease and has never walked. She was confined to a wheelchair at the age of two, and to her bed at the age of twelve. She lost her sight at the age of twenty-three, and now her hearing is gone. But in her darkness and despair, Jane Merchant found God. She reached out to Him. Believed what He said about Himself. Took a tremendous leap of faith, and, in the process, found hope.

She began writing poetry. Many of her poems have been printed in *McCalls*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Atlantic Monthly* and other magazines. One of her poems describes her pilgrimage:

Full half a hundred times I've sobbed, "I can't go on."
Yet, full half a hundred times I've hushed my sobs and gone.
My answer, if you ask me how, may seem presumptuously odd,
But what keeps me keeping on when I cannot, is God.²

That's the answer to our quest for reality and certainty: God! The loving, gracious, giving, dependable nature of God. The man of faith does not praise his unconquerable soul. He praises God. He does not say, "What a good boy am I," but, "How great Thou art!" He does not say, "Seeing is believing," because he knows believing is seeing! Biblical faith always walks without benefit of sight, resting its case upon the nature of God. His fidelity. His justice. His mercy.

If you want to grow in the Lord, grow in the Lord, get to know the truth about Him. Build your hope upon Him. Like Abraham, take Him at His word when it seems ridiculous to do so. And, like Abraham, you, too, shall see God work in mysterious ways His wonders to perform.

In college, my agnostic friends used to ask what they thought was a sophisticated question:

Can God close and open a door at the same time? If you said no, you were admitting God was not omnipotent. The answer, of course, was, “Yes, He can, but He won’t because God doesn’t do stupid things!” God operates within laws He Himself has established because He knows keeping those laws is the highest good. When God makes a promise, He keeps it. Not because He has to, but because He chooses to. That’s the way He is. That’s His nature.

But, more often than not, there is a time lag between promise and performance. In Abram’s case it was twenty-five years. During this time, between promise and performance, we have an opportunity to exercise our faith and, thus, make it stronger. When we fail to do that -- when, despite what we say to the contrary, we act as if God were dead, or a weakling who cannot deliver on His promises -- we miss the joy of proving Him good to His word, thus adding to our confidence. Fortifying our faith. Strengthening our hope. And that’s a shame. We miss the blessings which could be ours if we would trust God while we still face our problems, rather than after the problem is solved.

What is the big hurdle facing you at the moment? What is the overriding problem confronting you right now? What is the area of supreme improbability in your life? Make it a matter of surrender to God. Now. Today. While the concern exists. Take one of God’s promises and stand on it. The Bible is full of them. Then, like Abraham of old, let the good Lord work it out.

Remember the time lag, and use it as a time of testing. A time to walk by faith, not by sight. Be a bulldog of tenacious trust. Grab hold of the God who promises and refuses to let go. It may be a while before the answer comes. But when it comes, it will be doubly sweet. You and your faith will be better, stronger, more hopeful.

Perhaps you are thinking, “John, I’d like to do that. I’d like to cast myself in utter abandonment upon God, but I’ve got that hang-up you wrote about earlier. I suffer from the dual anxiety of wondering: How do I get through to God? and How do I know it when I’ve done it? Frankly, I don’t see any connection between God’s oath to Abraham, and my own

personal quest for reality and certainty.”

Well, the relevance lies in the fact that the promise was to Abraham *and his seed* (Genesis 22: 15-18). The Bible explains that Abraham's seed is not literal, but spiritual. *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise”* (Galatians 3:28, 29).

The promise God first made to Abram of Ur has been extended to Christ's church. How do we know? Think about it. The covenant God made with Abram included two prophecies. First, his seed would be multiplied. Abraham lived to see that part of the prophecy fulfilled through the birth of his son and his grandsons. Second, through his seed, the nations of the world would be blessed. This phase of the prophecy only began to become true at the birth of Jesus, Israel's greatest son.

Now, if you have given yourself to Jesus Christ, been born again through Him, become part of His church through whom the world will be blessed and, at this very moment, is being brought back to God, then you are the spiritual seed of Abraham. Along with every other true believer, you are heir to all the promises God made to Abraham's seed in perpetuity.

This is the foundation stone upon which your faith rests: you are heir to all the promises God made to Abraham. It is another wonderful reason for the hope which is within you as a Christian. Because God is God and His promises are doubly secure, you can get through to Him! And, you can know it when you've done it!

“In order that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we may have strong encouragement, we who have fled for refuge in laying hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us” (Hebrews 6:18-20).

In a few weeks we will look at the Old Testament tabernacle. We will see it as a magnificent foreshadowing of the ministry of Christ. We will study the outer court, the inner court, the various furnishings and the Holy of Holies which was behind the veil. It was there, in that holiest of places, God was felt to dwell. So sacred was this spot, only one person was permitted entry. The high priest. And then only once a year for a very short time. We shall see, in thrilling detail, how Christ, the perfect sacrifice, made the ancient annual sacrifice completely unnecessary, for He ministers in the true tabernacle of God, constantly making intercession on our behalf.

For the moment, however, I want you to see a wonderful truth. Here is something to savor. To revel in and wonder at. Here is another reason for the hope that is within you. Jesus has gone through, or beyond, the veil. By so doing, He has opened the way to God, not just for Himself, but “*as a forerunner for us*” (6:20).

God, who before Christ was thought to be a distant stranger, is now known to be a loving friend. Because Jesus has gone “*within the veil*,” He who said, “*I am the door*” (John 10:9), has jammed the door open. And we, you and I, have access to God any time of the day or night. We have a place of refuge near to the heart of God. An anchor safe and sure (6:19). We have access to God and the assurance of being heard.

These references to a place of refuge (6:18) and an anchor safe and sure (6:19) are beautiful. The book of Numbers reveals a very interesting Old Testament provision (Numbers 35:9 ff). If a person accidentally killed someone and there were those who wanted to hold him accountable, possibly even put him to death, he could flee to what was called a “city of refuge.” In that city, he was safe. He could not be unjustly punished (Deuteronomy 4:41-43; 19:5; Joshua 20).

Do you see it? God, in His loving grace has prepared a perfect place of refuge for those of us

who are often in the role of fugitives. If we will flee to Jesus, we shall find Him to be our high and holy fortress, a strong shoulder on which to rest, a precious and loving Saviour in Whose company is fellowship and joy!

But, not only do we have a refuge, we have an anchor safe and sure. An anchor that rests, not in the hold of the ship, for our confidence is not in ourselves. Nor does it rest in shifting sands where it can be pulled loose by treacherous waves, for our confidence is not in our feelings which are affected by every wind of circumstance which blows. Rather, our anchor is “*within the veil*” (6:19). It is hooked on the “Rock of Ages.” It is moored on the only real immovable object there is: the throne of God Himself. Thus, we are secure for time and eternity.

Amid all the storms of life, our anchor holds. It finds its certainty in God. In the fact that Jesus, who entered “*within the veil*,” has opened the way to heaven and keeps it open. This is our hope. Jesus jams open the door. Therefore, we have access to God any time of the day or night. We can get through to Him. And, we can know it when we’ve done it!

Notes

1. M. R. DeHaan, Hebrews (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), p. III.
2. A. John Nastari, Questions Christ Asked (Lake Oswego, OR: A. John Nastari, 2890 SW Delwood Drive, Lake Oswego, OR 97034), p. 64.