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AN ANCHOR FOR YOUR SOUL

Hebrews 6:13-20

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Hebrews Lesson 19

An Anchor for Your Soul Hebrews 6:13-20

Fishermen tend to be incurable optimists. A guy asked his neighbor how the fishing was going. "Better," he said. "Last week I went out for four hours and didn't catch a thing. Yesterday, I got the same result in only three hours" (*Reader's Digest* [8/87], p. 80).

Many confuse optimism and biblical hope. Biblical hope *is* optimistic, but it differs greatly from worldly optimism or positive thinking. Biblical hope is an optimism based on certainty and truth, not upon a cheery disposition that looks on the bright side. If hope rests on mere fantasy, it is worthless. To be valid, hope must be based on truth and certainty. Since our God is the God of hope (Rom. 15:13), we who represent Him to this hopeless world must be people of hope—not mere optimists, but people filled with hope because of the certainty of God's promises in Christ.

The author of Hebrews was writing to people who were facing hardship and persecution because of their Christian faith. A few were tempted to abandon Christ and return to Judaism. He is urging them to persevere by putting their focus on the superiority of Jesus Christ and the salvation that He has provided. He is trying to instill in them biblical hope—not just a positive, cheerful disposition—but a steady attitude of joy based on the promises of God, who cannot lie.

He uses a metaphor used only here in the Bible, of an anchor. But instead of going down into the ocean, this anchor goes up into the heavens, behind the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us. He has become our high priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek. Thus he brings his discussion back to where he left off before his lengthy exhortation (5:10); in the next chapter he will develop this theme. But here he is saying,

The certain hope of our future salvation is an anchor to steady our souls while we wait on God in present storms.

The main reason a ship needs an anchor is to ride out storms so that it is not blown off course or into the rocks or reefs nearby.

Even in a safe harbor, a ship needs an anchor so that it will not drift, hit something, and sink. Whether in the storms of life or in the harbor during the calm times of life, we all need an anchor for our souls so that we do not destroy our lives.

Verse 19 begins, "which we have" (Greek text). Some understand the antecedent to be "strong encouragement"; others think that it is "hope." Still others think that since Jesus Himself is our hope, that He is our anchor. All of these views are somewhat overlapping and complementary. God's sure promises give us strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us. In the final sense, we do not hope in hope itself, but in Christ, and all that is promised in Him. But it seems to me that the anchor is the certain hope of salvation that God has provided in Christ. In the storms of life, if we take hold of the hope of His salvation, we will have the steadiness for our souls that we need to endure.

1. The hope of our future salvation is certain.

The author hammers home the absolute certainty of our salvation. He uses Abraham as an example of one who through faith and patience inherited the promises (6:12). He goes back to Genesis 22:16-17, where after Abraham displayed his faith in God by his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, God swore by Himself surely to bless Abraham and to multiply his descendants. Then the author applies this to the heirs of the promise, namely, believers in Christ. He gives four reasons why our hope of salvation in Christ is certain:

A. Our hope of future salvation is certain because God's promises have never failed any that trusted in them.

Abraham is "Exhibit A" of a man who trusted God against all odds and found Him to be faithful. Paul called Abraham "the father of all who believe," and added, "In hope against hope he believed..." (Rom. 4:11, 18).

Abraham's life is the story of God initiating and promising, with Abraham responding in faith. God appeared to Abraham while he was still named Abram, living in Ur of the Chaldees. He commanded Abram to leave his relatives and that city and go to a place that God would show him (Acts 7:2-3). Abram's obedience was not easy. In that day, you didn't just pack up a U-Haul and head out on the interstate, keeping in touch with the folks back

home through frequent emails and phone calls. To move hundreds of miles away meant permanent separation from family and friends. There were unknown hardships to be encountered. Would the people of the new land be hostile or friendly? Could you provide adequately for your family there? What about learning the new language? There weren't real estate offices to help you get resettled into a new home. Where would you live?

But Abram obeyed. God had promised to multiply Abram, making him the father of a multitude. His name, Abram, meant, "exalted father," but his wife Sarah was barren. They were getting up in years, but had no children in spite of God's promise. Can you imagine the encounters he had as he and Sarah moved into Canaan? This 75-year-old man says, "Hello, my name is Abram [exalted father]." The Canaanite responds, "Nice to meet you. How many children do you have?" "None yet." Right!

But then God added insult to injury. When Abram was 99, the Lord appeared to him, reaffirmed His promise to multiply him exceedingly, and then changed his name to Abraham, meaning "father of a multitude"! He has been waiting for 24 years since God first promised to give him a son. He still has no children, except for Ishmael through Hagar. But now he tells everyone that God has given him a new name, "father of a multitude"! It would be like a bald man named Harry, and God says, "Let's change your name to Bushy-haired Harry"!

When Abraham died at 175, he had fathered several nations through Ishmael's descendants and through the sons that he had with Keturah (Gen. 25:1-4, 12-16). But as far as sons through Isaac, Abraham died with twin, 15-year-old grandsons, Esau and Jacob. He owned no real estate in Canaan, except for the cave that he bought to bury Sarah. But he died in faith, "looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb. 11:10). Though Abraham didn't see it, history has validated God's promise, that his descendants, both physically and spiritually (Gal. 3:7), are as many as the stars of heaven, and as innumerable as the sand of the seashore (Heb. 11:12).

The lesson for us is: There has never been anyone who trusted in God's promises and was finally disappointed. God may delay the visible answers to His promises, because He always an-

swers in *his* time, not in ours. We may not see the answer until we're in heaven. But He is utterly trustworthy to keep His Word. If He has promised eternal salvation to the one who has faith in Jesus, you can count on it as absolutely true!

B. Our hope of future salvation is certain because God's purpose is unchangeable.

The Greek word translated "desiring" (6:17) is cognate with the noun "purpose" (same verse), and points to "the deliberate exercise of volition" (G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* [Charles Scribner's Sons], p. 84). It means that God purposed to show the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, which here refers specifically to installing His Son as a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek (6:20). This points to His purpose to be glorified by sending His Son to save a people, "the heirs of the promise," for His name.

It is inconceivable that the Sovereign God would purpose to send His Son to redeem a people for His glory, but then leave the fulfillment of that purpose up to the so-called "free will" of rebellious sinners who are, to use Charles Wesley's phrase, "fast bound in sin and nature's night" ("And Can It Be")! If God had left salvation up to the will of fallen sinners, none would be saved, because there is none who seeks for God (Rom. 3:10-18).

God calls His people here "heirs of the promise." Heirs do not choose to be heirs. If we could choose to be heirs, we'd all be waiting in line for the fortunes of the Kennedy's or the Rockefeller's. Heirs are chosen by the one who owns the estate. It is his prerogative to choose one person and overlook another, because it is *his* estate and he has the right to dispense it as he chooses.

Yet many today deny that right to Almighty God and say that He must give everyone an equal chance to choose to be His heirs! They stand the biblical doctrine of election on its head, saying that He foresaw that we would choose Him, then He put us on the list! But that view robs God of His sovereignty. His sovereignty means that *He* chooses the heirs. He chose Abram from everyone else in Ur, and excluded Abram's immediate family members. He rejected Ishmael and chose Isaac. He rejected Esau and chose Jacob. Such choices are God's right as the Sovereign Lord. And if you protest,

"That's not fair," you need to read Romans 9:11-23, where Paul anticipates and answers that response by saying, in effect, "How dare you even raise the question that God is unfair! He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. And you have no right to answer back to God!"

In Isaiah 46:9-11, God says,

For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, "My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure"; calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of My purpose from a far country. Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it.

In the context, God is talking about raising up the pagan king, Cyrus, to accomplish God's purpose. God is not bound by the will of proud man to do what He purposes to do. He has purposed to give an elect people to His Son (John 6:37-40), and He will accomplish His purpose! Denying God's sovereign election makes assurance of salvation shaky. If it's up to man's will, "lots of luck!" But if our hope of salvation is based on God's purpose to the heirs of His promise, then your hope is certain and secure!

C. Our hope of future salvation is certain because God's person is incapable of lying.

The author states the obvious, "it is impossible for God to lie" (6:18). If He lied, He would deny His very nature as the God of truth, whose very word is truth (Isa. 65:16; John 14:6; 17:17). If God has said that Jesus has made purification for our sins (Heb. 1:4), and that He has entered within the veil as our forerunner as a high priest after the order of Melchizedek (6:20), then *it is true* and we dare not question Him!

We're all prone to bend the truth when it suits our purposes. We don't want to look bad, and so we tell "little white lies." We "overlook" reporting things on our income tax forms that would cost us more in taxes. We withhold the truth when it is to our advantage to keep things under cover. But in spite of our propensity toward compromising the truth, we get offended if anyone chal-

lenges the truthfulness of our word, and we would be outraged if they directly called us liars!

But here is the God for whom it is *impossible* to lie. He has never lied in all of eternity. When we doubt His promises, and especially His promise of salvation to the one who believes in Jesus Christ, we are in effect calling Him a liar! 1 John 5:10 says, "The one who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself; the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has given concerning His Son." Do you believe God's promise concerning His Son, or are you calling God a liar? Our hope of future salvation is certain because God's person is incapable of lying.

So the author has hit three hammer blows to show that the hope of our future salvation is certain: God's promises have never failed; His purpose is unchangeable; and His person is incapable of lying. As if that were not enough, he adds a fourth:

D. Our hope of future salvation is certain because God's pledge backs up His promise.

God's bare word should be sufficient, since His word is always true. But when God says it with an oath or pledge, He wants us to know that it is a done deal! To show the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, God "interposed with an oath" (6:17). Because of the weakness of our flesh, God condescends to add the oath to His word to give us double assurance.

In 6:15, the author uses a human illustration. When men are having a dispute, and they swear under penalty of perjury to do something, that ends the matter. They *must* do what they have sworn to do, or they will pay a stiff penalty. But when the God who cannot lie interposes with an oath or pledge, how much more certain is His word! You've got two unchangeable things: God's promise and His oath. These two things make our hope of future salvation both "sure and steadfast" (6:19).

Why is this so important? What difference does it make in our day to day lives?

2. The hope of our future salvation is an anchor to steady our souls in present trials.

There is a three-fold progression of thought here:

- A. Future salvation is secure for all that have taken refuge in Christ.

The author identifies those to whom he is writing, along with himself, as “we who have taken refuge” (6:18). He does not specify what they have taken refuge from, but his Hebrew readers would have immediately thought of the cities of refuge in the Old Testament, where the man guilty of manslaughter could flee from the avenger of blood (Num. 35:11-12). These cities were a spiritual picture of the refuge that God has provided for sinners to flee for protection from the wrath to come.

In verse 20 of our text, the author mentions Jesus as our high priest, within the veil, where God’s holy presence meant instant death to any sinner who dared to go there. Although people’s eyes are blinded so that they do not see their sin and God’s holiness, every sinner needs a refuge from God’s coming judgment. Jesus Christ is the refuge that God has provided. The question is, *have you fled to that refuge?* Have you trusted in Christ alone to save you from your sins? If your hope is in your good works, you are not saved. Your hope of salvation must be in Christ alone.

- B. Having taken refuge in Christ, we now must take hold of the hope of our future salvation.

Our salvation is secure because it rests on the promise and unchangeable purpose of God. It is not our feeble grasp of Him, but His firm hold on us, that secures our hope of heaven. But you may wonder, “Why then does the writer encourage us to take hold of the hope set before us? If it depends totally on God and His unchangeable purpose, why do we have to hope in Him?”

John Piper (<http://www.soundofgrace.com/piper96/11-17-96.htm>) answers this way:

What Christ bought for us when he died was not the freedom from having to hold fast but the enabling power to hold fast. What he bought was not the nullification of our wills as though we didn’t have to hold fast, but the empowering of our wills because we want to hold fast. What he bought was not the canceling of the commandment to hold fast but the fulfillment of the commandment to hold fast.

He goes on to cite Paul's statement in Philippians 3:12, "I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus." Christ Jesus had laid hold of Paul by His sovereign grace. As a result, Paul pressed on to lay hold of the hope of all that his salvation promised.

This means that we must battle discouragement by taking hold by faith of God's promise to save all who take refuge in Christ. God's promise and His oath are two strong motivating forces to encourage us to grab onto the hope set before us and don't let go. Then that hope becomes an anchor for our souls.

- C. The hope of our future salvation anchors us to wait on God in present storms.

The main reason you need an anchor is to keep from drifting into things that would destroy you, especially during storms. Abraham had his storms as he waited on God. In two different moments of weakness, he thought that powerful men would take his wife from him, which would have nullified God's promise of a son through her. And so he lied that she was his sister. At another moment of despair, he went in to Sarah's maid, Hagar, and conceived Ishmael. But in spite of these failures, "in hope against hope, he believed" (Rom. 4:18), until God fulfilled the promise.

We face numerous types of storms that threaten to rob us of hope in Christ. There are *storms of false doctrine* that can blow us off course (Eph. 4:14). We must weather them by holding firmly to the promise of salvation in Christ alone by grace alone through faith alone.

There will be *storms of doubt*, when we question the Christian faith, or perhaps even the existence of God. We can weather them by coming back to the truth of the resurrection of Jesus, which is the bedrock of the entire faith (1 Cor. 15:1-19). If He is not risen, our faith *is* in vain. But if He is risen, then our future salvation is certain and our hope can rest confidently in Him.

There will be *storms of difficult trials*, where we wonder why God is allowing them and question whether He loves us. We weather them by remembering that God, who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, has promised to bring us through every conceivable difficulty to ultimate glorification (Rom. 8:28-39).

There may be *storms of defeat*, where we fall into sin and dishonor our Lord and Savior. We can weather even these storms if we realize that our High Priest is praying for us, that our faith may not fail, and that by His grace, we can be restored (Luke 22:32).

Conclusion

I read of a Christian man who made a trip to Russia in 1993. He felt conspicuous walking down the streets of Moscow and could not figure out why. He wanted to blend in, but it was obvious that people knew he was not Russian. He asked the group of Russian educators with whom he was working whether it was his American clothes: jeans and a Chicago Bulls shirt. "No, it's not your clothes," they replied.

"What is it, then?" he asked.

They huddled together and talked for several minutes. Then one, speaking for the group, answered politely, "It is your face."

"My face!" he laughed. "How does my face look different?"

They talked again and then one of the teachers quietly said, "You have hope." (*World Magazine* [3/6/99], p. 37.)

As Christians living in a world that Paul describes as "having no hope and without God" (Eph. 2:12), we should stand out as people of hope. The certain hope of our future salvation is the anchor that God has given to us to steady our souls, even in times of storm.

A cheerful older Christian was asked the secret of his triumphant attitude. He said, "I've read the last book of the Bible, so I know how the story ends. I'm on the winning side!" We have a high priest within the veil. He has promised to save all who take refuge in Him. Let's take hold of our certain hope in Jesus!

Discussion Question

1. How can a believer keep trusting in God when He delays answers to prayers for years? Why does God make us wait?
2. Why is the doctrine of election essential for having proper assurance of salvation?
3. How do we balance the tension between “examine yourself to see if you are in the faith” (2 Cor. 13:5) and “take hold of the hope set before us” (Heb. 6:18)?
4. How should we “process” discouragement? What steps should we take to recover our hope in God? (See Psalms 42 & 43.)

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