

STUDIES IN HEBREWS – 10

THE SURE AND STEADY PROMISES OF GOD

(Hebrews 6:13-20)

We saw last week how the Preacher prepared his congregation for some deep water ahead. We saw how he used some reverse psychology by suggesting, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, that the congregation might be a bit slow to grasp the next section of the sermon. Having thus taken them out of their lethargy, he then went on to warn them of the very real dangers of deep involvement in the ways of God – there can be no turning back. We also saw that the Preacher had great confidence, both in the congregation, who were indeed ready, and in God.

Before setting out on the advanced course and studying the fact and implications of Jesus' high priesthood, the Preacher takes one more pause to pick up on this last point – confidence in God.

The mere mention of Abraham in 6:12 brings to mind the larger story of Abraham and draws attention to the promise-making, promise-keeping God. So the Preacher takes time to tell once again something of Abraham's story. This is not a digression. The Preacher is saying that if, like Abraham, you can discern and hold onto the profound truth of Jesus' high priestly role you will receive the key to hope. You will be able to endure, living patiently the life of faith, all the way to the end, and will become inheritors of the promises.

This passage is based on the custom, strong in the Ancient Middle East, of oath-taking. In the ancient world, to guarantee a promise or give extra value to the trustworthiness of their words, a person would swear an oath on a higher authority, usually one of the gods. In the Jewish tradition, "an oath is an appeal to God as a witness on some disputed matter" (Philo). When two people were in disagreement, word against word, one of the parties could make an appeal to God and say, in effect, "If I'm not telling the truth may God do to me as he pleases."

We no longer have that tradition, though it is still found in some parts of our society. Children will still stay, "Cross my heart, and hope to die." And you will still hear people say, "As God is my witness." But, by and large, we no longer believe that "an Englishman's word is his bond."

The Old Testament did not prohibit such oaths, but allowed them only in the name of God (Deuteronomy 6:13). To break such an oath was a serious matter and was dealt with harshly and God pronounced a curse on all who swore falsely (Zechariah 5:3ff).

It's against this background that the Preacher speaks about God's promises. He reminds us that we swear by something greater than us, but, of course, God cannot do this for there is no greater power. So when God took a solemn oath to Abraham, and all who would follow him, he swore by the highest of all authorities – he swore by himself (6:13). God made the promise and swore by his own name, "two unchangeable things"

(6:18), which reassure the congregation and us of the impossibility that God would go back on his promise. And how we were to respond to this unchangeable promise – just as Abraham did, by waiting patiently and so receiving what had been promised (6:15).

Beside the image of God's sworn oath there is a second thread set before us in this passage. 6:19ff takes up the theme of hope referred to in 6:18 – “the hope set before us” by God's promise. The picture is a nautical one, of an anchor and chain. This is why the Preacher has spent so much time and energy on establishing beyond doubt the trustworthiness and reliability of God. Christian hope is anchored in God, whose promises run like a strong chain throughout history.

Here we see another aspect of God's character referred to earlier – his commitment to us. This comes as a shock to the world around us who do not know what commitment is. We live in a world where, as Tom Stoppard says in his play “The Real Thing”, “There are no commitments, only bargains.” In a world without commitment, only bargains, there can be no lasting hope, only a ceaseless attempt to gain a better bargaining position. The preacher knows that God has made a lasting commitment, not a flimsy bargain, with his people. Those who rely on the God who promises may rest in the sure and certain hope that God will fulfil his promises.

If we stop and read 6:19f carefully we will see the return of a picture used before. In these verses we see an anchor firmly embedded in the heavens with a chain of hope that passes through this world, carried by Jesus, “our forerunner” (6:20). At first we might think that we are attached to the other end of the chain, but then the Preacher tells us we must “take hold of the hope set before us” (6:18). The picture here seems to be of a chain secured at both ends, stretched across wild waters and forming a safe place for those who will hang on. This chain extends from heaven down to earth, where we can “take hold” of it. Christians steady themselves by trusting in God, holding on for dear life to the chain of hope.

We have seen this chain before. In the journey of the Son portrayed in Hebrews 1 & 2, where the Glorious Son descends to earth and becomes the Suffering Son and then ascends back to heaven as the Triumphant Son. The Preacher sees this journey as a blazing trail – Jesus is “our forerunner” going ahead, showing us the way and now we see him laying a chain for us to hold onto at all times so that we need not get lost or lose our footing.

In describing Christian hope as a chain anchored in heaven the Preacher speaks of heaven as “the inner sanctuary behind the curtain” (6:19), an image drawn from both the wilderness Tabernacle (Exodus 26:31-35) and the Temple. In those buildings only the high priest could enter that sanctuary, the “Holy of Holies”. The Preacher tells us that Jesus has entered through the holy space on our behalf. He is, in fact a unique high priest, “in the order of Melchizedek” (6:20). With these words the Preacher closes this section of the sermon, begun back in 5:6, and draws back the curtain on the next four chapters.

Amen

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