

SESSION SEVENTEEN

THOSE WHO INHERIT THE PROMISES

Heb 6:13-20

I. INTRODUCTION

In the preceding section, the author confronted his readers that they were *sluggish hearers* who needed to move on to maturity (5:11–6:1), but went on to encourage them to overcome their *sluggishness* through the exercise of faith and patient endurance (6:12). In doing so, they would surely be among those who "inherit the promises" (probably eschatological) rather than suffering the fate of severe judgment from God. The author was obviously confident that they had not yet reached the dismal spiritual state mentioned in Heb 6:6, and he expressed his high hopes for them. As a means of motivation, the author now turns their attention to consider Abraham, a man who well illustrates this principle that those who exercise faith and patient endurance do indeed inherit God's promises. His choice of Abraham is significant, for to these Jewish readers Abraham was considered the "father" of the Jews. Surely, they should want to follow in his example! Just as God did not renege on His promises to faithful Abraham, neither will He renege on the promises for these New Covenant believers who are now participants of a heavenly calling to the heavenly Jerusalem.

II. AN EXAMPLE FROM ABRAHAM'S LIFE (6:13-15)

Throughout his epistle, the author has made ample usage of Abraham (cf. 2:16; 6:13-15; 7:4-5; 11:8-19). In the particular case of Heb 6:13-15, the example that the author provides is not related to Abraham's justification, but rather to his faithfulness as a believer . . . an observation that has important implications for the preceding warning in 6:4-8 (namely, the author is thinking of enduring in faithfulness, not of the need for experiencing conversion). The incident the author has in mind is Genesis 22 when Abraham's loyalty was tested by the instruction to sacrifice Isaac (note that his quotation in Heb 6:14 is from Gen 22:17). Following the successful completion of the test, God declared several promises to Abraham (see Gen 22:17-18), most of which had been given him earlier:

The Promise of Blessing (General)

"indeed I will greatly bless you" (cf. 12:2; 15:1)

The Promise of Many Descendants

"and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens, and as the sand which is on the seashore" (cf. 12:2a; 15:5; 17:6)

The Promise of Ultimate Triumph Over Enemies

"and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies" (cf. 15:13-16)

The Promise of Universal Blessing Through Abraham's Seed

"And in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice" (cf. 12:3)

So, these promises in Gen 22:17-18 were essentially a reiteration of promises that God had already made to Abraham earlier. The crucial point, however, is that God introduced these promises with a statement that implied God was making an oath: "By Myself I have sworn" (Gen 22:16).¹

The point the author of Hebrews is trying to make is that God did not simply reward Abraham with promises for his faith and obedience; He *strengthened* the promises by the addition of an oath. Since God's word is good enough, why would He need to make it more certain by an oath? The answer, of course, is that the oath is not necessary; but God gave it anyway. But let's see the condition under which the oath was made.

Prior to Genesis 22, Abraham already had the promise that God would make him fruitful. In Gen 17:6, for instance, God said, "I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come forth from you" (cf. 12:2a; 15:5). After the display of Abraham's obedience in Gen 22, God reaffirms this promise, but this time by way of oath-making:

Heb 6:14 = "I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply you."

εἰ μὴν¹ εὐλογῶν εὐλογήσω σε καὶ πληθύνων πληθυνῶ σε

NOTES ON THE LXX TEXT FROM GEN 22:17

The initial εἰ is not found in all mss. Ms B (Vaticanus) has ἦ, but Ms A has εἰ. The pronoun σε in Heb 6:14 (at the end of the line) is not in Gen 22:17. Instead, the original had τὸ σπέρμα σου (= "your seed").

Of the several promises that were made in Gen 22:17-18, the author of Hebrews seems to highlight the promise pertaining to the multiplied seed (since he stops with the words "multiply you"). This is probably due to the fact that the test itself threatened the promise of having many descendants. Had Abraham indeed killed Isaac, there would have been no seed through whom the covenant promises might continue. Everything hinged upon Isaac living on (recall Gen 17:19,21). This is what makes the test of Abraham's faith so crucial: it is not just a matter of sacrificing *a son* but of the particular son with whom the covenant promises and program were attached.

Abraham's obedience to this test, however, brought an *enhanced confirmation* of the promises. Furthermore, God prefaced the reiteration of the promises with words that reflected an oath on His part. In doing so, He is bound to His word by His character. This ought to be a lesson to the readers: faithful endurance in obedience secures God's promises all the more!

The statement in 6:15 "And thus, having patiently waited, he obtained the promise" may be intended to mean that God reiterated the promise to him with an oath rather than that he saw the promise actually fulfilled (comp. Heb 11:13,39-40). What he obtained was not the fulfillment of the promise, but God's swearing the promise to him. In any case, Abraham is a model of a man

¹ Take note that the wording of the clause "He swore by Himself" (ὤμοσεν καθ' ἑαυτοῦ) in Hebrews 6:13 is obviously meant to reflect the LXX translation of Gen 22:16: "By Myself I have sworn" (κατ' ἑμαυτοῦ ὤμοσα).

who exercised faith and who "patiently endured" (from μακροθυμέω). Note that the verb form μακροθυμέω is cognate to the noun μακροθυμία that we saw in Heb 6:12. In other words, Abraham perfectly demonstrates what the author had exhorted his readers to be in 6:12. Lane comments, "The writer's exposition in vv 13-15 provides a biblical basis for the community to emulate the faith and endurance of Abraham in the certain expectation that they will receive what God has promised to them" (Lane, 1:151).

III. The Implication of the Oath For Those Who Are "Holding Fast" (6:16-20)

In the remainder of this unit, the author will do two things: (1) he will point out how significant this event was in Genesis 22 that God would reaffirm His own word with an oath; and (2) he will elucidate the implications for his readers.

A. Highlighting of the Oath Made to Abraham (6:16-17)

The author wants to point out the significance of the promise reaffirmation given by *oath*. With men, oaths are commonly used to make an agreement certain (because men are known to be disloyal). But God does not need to use an oath. Since He never lies, why would anyone expect God to undergird His promises with an oath? Obviously, the *oath* is not necessary. So, the fact that God gave one anyway is significant, and we ought to be that much more encouraged about His promises.

Furthermore, when men do make an oath, they make it by someone greater than themselves. Quite commonly, men swear by the name of their god as a means of reaffirming their word. Even in the Old Testament, the Israelites were instructed to swear (i.e., make an oath) only in the name of Yahweh (Deut 6:13; 10:20). But obviously God Himself cannot do this. He cannot make an oath in the name of His god, because He is the only god! Therefore (in contrast to men), for God to make an oath, He must do so in His own name.

Such an oath demonstrates the unchangeableness of His purpose. God did this (adding an oath on top of His own certain word) just so He could demonstrate to Abraham and Sarah just how unchangeable His purpose was with them, the "heirs of the promise." Yet, what God did in Abraham's case is instructional for the readers of Hebrews.

B. The Implication of God's Oath with Abraham (6:18-20)

God cannot lie in regard to two unchangeable things:

- (1) the certainty of the word/promise of God itself (He does not lie, in keeping with His attribute of *truthfulness*)
- (2) the oath He takes in making the promise (He cannot swear by anyone greater than Himself)

Beginning in verse 18, the author personalizes Abraham's situation to his readers. Abraham and Sarah were "heirs of the promise," which God undergirded by an oath. The author's readers have the promises of God before them, namely, the promises connected with the New Covenant and of reigning with Christ.² They are entitled to "strong encouragement" in God's

² We would do well to remember the announcement in Heb 1:14 of those who "inherit salvation" (which is eschatological in light of chapter two), of Jesus' work to regain the possibility of dominion for man, and of the exhortation to be diligent to enter God's greater eschatological rest (ch 4).

promises, for God is absolutely trustworthy in the act of *promising*. Yet, just as Abraham had to first patiently endure and *by faith* proceed to sacrifice Isaac, so the readers of the epistle must first "hold fast the hope set before them" before the promises can be assured to them.

The *NASB* translates the verb κρατῆσαι as "to take hold of" (compare the *NIV* "take hold"). The verb κρατέω, however, is used only one other time in the book, namely, Heb 4:14. In that case, it appeared as an exhortation: "let us hold fast our confession." Lexically, the word can mean either "grasp, seize" or "hold fast." In light of the use in Heb 4:14, the latter seems to be the author's intention. The translation "take hold" is too mild, and the author seems to have in mind the "holding fast" of our hope. In fact, this nuance of κρατέω seems to echo the very similar verb κατεχω, which also means "to hold fast." The author has used this verb three times in the book to express his critical concern that the readers "hold fast" (Heb 3:6; 3:14; 10:23). In Heb 3:6, for instance, he warned them "if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end." Similarly, he exhorted them in 10:23, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful."

What then is the "hope" (ἐλπίς) they are to *hold fast*? Undoubtedly, it has something to do with their confession, for the word "hope" is used in regard to *holding fast* the confession in both 4:14 (with κρατέω) and 10:23 (with κατεχω). More specifically, the "hope" is the *blood of Christ* . . . the hallmark of the New Covenant. This becomes evident in the next chapter when the author seeks to show the contrast between the hope through Christ's priestly ministry and that through the Levitical ministry. He states in Heb 7:19, "and on the other hand there is a bringing in of a better hope (ἐλπίδος), through which we draw near to God." Thus, the ones who can have strong encouragement are those who are *holding fast* to the hope of Christ's atoning sacrifice. The blood of Christ is the very object of our confession of faith. As the old song goes, "My faith is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness." Though the readers ought to hold fast to their confession of faith that is focused on the blood of Christ, the author is concerned that they might turn away from it and retreat to some form of Judaism. Yet the Levitical system will be of no help to them, nor will they have any "strong encouragement" in fleeing for refuge there.

The mention of the feminine noun "hope" is followed in verse 19 by the feminine relative pronoun ἥν. This relative pronoun is used to introduce three affirmations that the author wants to make about our hope in the blood of Christ:

- 1) we have this as an anchor of our life³
- 2) it is both certain and secure
- 3) it enters "within the veil"

The latter affirmation of entering within the veil confirms that the blood of Christ is in view. The word for "veil" (καταπέτασμα) is specifically the "tabernacle veil" that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies [the word καταπέτασμα is used in Ex 26:31-35 in the LXX for the tabernacle veil]. Furthermore, the phrase τὸ ἐσώτερον τοῦ καταπετάσματος is used in the LXX for the Holy of Holies that lay behind the curtain (see Lev 16:2,12,15). It

³ ψυχή could also be translated "life" as in Heb 10:39 (Lane translates, "as an anchor for life").

will become clear in the course of the epistle, however, that the author has in mind the *heavenly* Holy of Holies (Heb 9:11-12; 9:24). It is there in the heavenly tabernacle—in the very presence of God—that Christ has appeared with His own blood on our behalf. Now that the heavenly reality has been achieved, no earthly presentation by a Levitical high priest can begin to offer a comparable hope!

Into this heavenly tabernacle, Christ has entered on our behalf as a forerunner.⁴ He has gone in advance before us. Because of going first with His blood on our behalf, we have confidence of also entering "the holy place by the blood of Jesus" (10:19).

The thought of Christ's blood entering the heavenly Holy of Holies naturally leads to thoughts of His priestly ministry. What gave Him the right to enter the heavenly Holy of Holies? The fact that He has become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek (6:20)!

With this statement, we have a fresh announcement of the subject that had previously been asserted in Heb 5:10. Having addressed the matter of his readers' immature state that threatens their future in 5:11–6:20, the author can only hope that they will respond positively to his exhortation. Thus he is ready to return to the subject of the Melchizedekan priesthood and elaborate on that subject so relevant to New Covenant believers.

To successfully gain these promises, they will need the help of their High Priest. Yet, the very matter of our Lord's priesthood is also undergirded by an oath from God, even as the promises to Abraham were. The promise of Jesus' priestly ministry is cast in an oath in Ps 110:4, "**The LORD has sworn** and will not change His mind, 'Thou art a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.'" If we flee for refuge to Him, we can have great confidence and security in doing so, because He has been appointed to such a ministry by an oath from God. With this thought, the author concludes his warning to his readers, and is now ready to explain more fully the matter of our Lord's Melchizedekian priesthood (which he will now do so in chapter 7).

A LESSON FOR OUR LIFE

Verse 15 could be translated, "and thus, having patiently endured, he obtained the promise." The point is not that Abraham simply *waited*. He had to endure through trial. The context clearly connects the obtaining of God's promise as a result of his willingness to offer Isaac. I don't think there is anything in all the world that could have done more to put his faith to the test. He certainly must have had thoughts of calling it off. Yet by faith he endured through the trial, and in doing so he stands as a great example to all of us who are marching along in our earthly pilgrimage. We may or may not come to a point of seriously giving thought to abandoning our faith, yet we can certainly waver in unbelief and even squander our time here on earth. In 2 Tim 2:12 we are told, "If we endure, we shall also reign with Him." You and I can have a rich reward if we follow Abraham's example. If there is anything in our life that is hindering our walk with God, let's do something about it today. Let's not hold back. Let's press on so as to *obtain the promises* that will certainly be fulfilled to us in our Lord's kingdom when He returns! How we live now does make a difference!!

⁴ Lane (1:154) suggests that ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν ("on our behalf") go with the verb rather than with πρόδρομος.