

MOVING ON TO MATURITY
The Greatest Encouragement of All
Hebrews 6:13-20

13 When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, 14 saying, "I will surely bless you and give you many descendants." 15 And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised. 16 Men swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. 17 Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. 18 God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. 19 We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, 20 where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek. Hebrews 6:13-20

I've been reminded this past week in several ways of the instability of life. I turn on the evening news, only to hear of thousands upon thousands who have or are dying in the wake of such a devastating cyclone in Myanmar. And as if that is not enough, I turn on the news a few days later to hear of thousands more whose lives are snuffed out by an earthquake in China. And it's not just the loss of life for those who have died and have now passed into an eternity. But there is the crushing grief and struggle of those family members who remain. That spells instability.

Closer to home, as I arrived at the church this past Wednesday morning, the entire area from 90th to 97th was tapped off. I soon discovered that two people were dead following a murder and an officer-involved shooting. And that is right here next to our property. As I was sitting that morning in the foyer, praying over this message and thinking about what had happened up the street, a man walked up to the door. He asked if I had just a few minutes to talk. As we sat down together, he shared with me his struggles, his depression, and his need for help.

All of us feel instable at times. Life can be relentlessly cruel and unfair. And as believers in Jesus Christ, you and I are not exempt from the instability and cruelty of living in a fallen world. How do we survive? How do we find stability – or we might say “stay-bility” – in the midst of such instability, both within us and around us?

The believers to whom this book was originally addressed needed “stay-bility” in the midst of instability. In their difficulties and discouragement, they were starting to drift. These Christians were tired, discouraged, and beginning to pull back from following hard after Christ. They were asking, “Is it really worth it?”

Ever feel like that? The instability of life can either develop us or discourage us. The difficulties within and without can either be an impetus to growth towards maturity, or an excuse to remain in a state of spiritual mediocrity.

As we looked two weeks ago at Hebrews 6:9-12, we saw four principles that can help us overcome this tendency to spiritual laziness. Do you remember what they are?

- **Realize what is at stake:** Giving up and pulling away from God in the face of difficulty will lead to a loss of blessing in this life and a loss of reward in the next.
- **Get on in your life with what accompanies salvation:** Our salvation is more than a “fire insurance policy” from hell. God has so much more in store for those who stay under and stay strong.
- **Don’t forget that God doesn’t forget.** God never, ever forgets our love expressed to Him by serving others. That should encourage us.
- **Imitate those who inherit.** And that includes people like Abraham, to whom the writer now turns as an example of patient endurance.

All of what is said in Hebrews 5:11 – 6:12, the third of five warning passages in this book, focuses on *our* responsibility. The writer is saying, “This is what *you* need to do to keep from giving up.” Now, however, the emphasis moves from our responsibility to God’s reliability. The focus of our passage this morning is not as much on what we are to do, but on who God is and what he does. And this is the greatest encouragement of all. *Our trust in God’s reliability leads to our “stay-bility.”*

To help us get a grasp on this truth, the speaker tells us two things. The first has to do with the future. The second has to do with the present. The first thing we need to understand and digest is this:

AS TO THE FUTURE, GOD’S PROMISES ARE SURE

This was the case for Abraham. Notice what he tells us in verses 12-14:

When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, saying, "I will surely bless you and give you many descendants."

When did God give this promise to Abraham? It was on the occasion of one of the most painful, gut-wrenching experiences this man of faith ever knew. Do you remember the story? It’s found in Genesis 22.

God calls to Abraham and says, “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, the very one who is the fulfillment of all I have promised you, and go, offer him up as a sacrifice to me.” So Abraham got up the next morning, saddled his donkey, and took with him his servants and his son, Isaac.

While on the way, Isaac noticed something really weird. He said to his dad, “Look, we’ve got fire and we’ve got wood. But where is the lamb for the offering?” Abraham wisely replied, “God himself will provide.”

When they reached the place where God had told him to go, Abraham built an altar, arranged the wood and then placed his son, Isaac, on top of the wood. But as he raised his knife, the Lord said, “Abraham, don’t do it! I now know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.” And God provided a ram for the sacrifice in the place of Isaac.

Have you ever tried to put yourself in Abraham's shoes? After all, on a purely emotional, relational level, Isaac was Abraham's most precious possession – his son, his only son. And now God is asking Abraham to take a step of radical, “hard-core” faith by giving Isaac back to God.

Since God in his wisdom took home our firstborn son nearly four years ago, I've struggled with this passage. Why God do you so often touch that aspect of our lives that is the most sensitive, the most vulnerable, that which we consider to be the most necessary to our very existence? We all have areas that we might consider to be “off-limits” to God's intervention. It could be a friend, a spouse, a family member, a personal dream, a job, our health, or even a ministry or a role of service.

But for Abraham, the problem is not only on an emotional, personal level. It's also on a theological level. God's command to sacrifice Isaac flatly, outright contradicts his previous promises concerning Isaac.ⁱ It was through Isaac that blessing was to come to the nations. Abraham certainly felt like God was playing “bait and switch” – “God, you promised one thing and now you're taking it away?”

Part of the answer to these questions is this: In our instability, even when we are at our extremity, God wants to demonstrate his reliability. And so to underscore his integrity, his reliability, God adds this note in Genesis 22:16-18:

I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possessionⁱⁱ of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.

It is this oath that the writer to the Hebrews is talking about when he says:

Men swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged.ⁱⁱⁱ
Hebrews 6:16-18

God did not lie to Abraham. And he doesn't lie to you and me. When we find ourselves in the most fiery tests that life can bring along our way, we must remind ourselves that God's promises are sure. “God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?” (Numbers 23:19). All that he has promised us concerning the gift of eternal life – and more specifically (in the context of this book) concerning his rich reward for work well done – will most certainly be fulfilled.

We need to keep in mind that this future rule and reign with Christ on this earth is something that is very real and tangible. It really will take place! It is not some spiritualized, “pie-in-the-sky” kind of idea, in which we enter into some meta-physical, celestial sphere where angels are ruling and floating around us. No, the coming Kingdom that this book is talking about is where we as believers will rule and reign with Christ.^{iv}

No wonder we're told in Hebrews 6:12 to "imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised." I read of two young girls who were talking. One said she had ten pennies. The other girl looked in her hand and said, "No you don't, you've only got five!" The other replied, "I have five in my hand, and my father told me he would give me five tonight. So I have ten!" She understood that her father's promise was as good as done. Do you?

I'll say it again. Faith in God's reliability leads to our "stay-bility." It did for Abraham. Notice Hebrews 6:15:

And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received^v what was promised.

Abraham firmly believed in God's reliability, his integrity. Oh, not perfectly. He had his moments of doubt and unbelief. But overall he clung to God's promises. In our instability we can turn to God's reliability. And when we do, we discover "stay-bility," giving us courage and endurance.

Our problem, however, comes in waiting patiently. As we face life's problematic twists and turns, we so often prefer to depend on our own human strategies to relieve the pain of the present rather than depend upon God's integrity and his promises for the future. We don't like to wait.

Charles Hadden Spurgeon, one of the greatest preachers of the 19th Century, once said this about waiting:

[Waiting] is one of the postures which a Christian soldier learns not without years of teaching. Marching and quick-marching are much easier to God's warriors than standing still. There are hours of perplexity when the most willing spirit, anxiously desirous to serve the Lord, knows not what part to take. Then what shall it do? Vex itself by despair? Fly back in cowardice, turn to the right hand in fear, or rush forward in presumption? No, but simply wait. Wait in prayer, however. Call upon God, and spread the case before Him; tell Him your difficulty, and plead His promise of aid...But wait in faith.^{vi}

Why does God put us in his "waiting room?" After all, a waiting room is no fun. I'll never forget that place of anxiety, uncertainty and pain as I waited the news of whether or not my father would pull through. The "waiting room" is no fun.

The answer, I believe, has to do with the next point. As to the future, God's promises are sure. But as to the present, Jesus is sufficient. And this gives us hope.

AS TO THE PRESENT, JESUS IS SUFFICIENT

That's what the writer is saying in verses 18-20. As I read these verses again, notice how hope is described:

God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the *hope* offered to us may be greatly encouraged. We have this *hope* as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. *It* enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek. Hebrews 6:18-20

Did you catch that? We can flee to hope and take hold of it. Hope is an anchor for our souls. And hope actually does something. It enters along with Jesus the “inner sanctuary” in heaven.

Notice first that our hope is so closely, intimately tied to Jesus Christ that the two are inseparable. His description of hope *is* his description of Jesus. And that’s what the writer has been telling us all along. The best way – in fact, the only way – to endure in this life is to fix your eyes, your faith, your *hope*, on Jesus.

So how is the sufficiency of Jesus described here? First, our hope in Jesus is described as a place of refuge: “We who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged” (6:18).

We are pictured first as refugees. We are like those fleeing an enemy or a country in turmoil. And you and I can often feel that way this side of heaven. The instability of life takes its toll. We need a place of refuge.

In the Old Testament we read that cities of refuge were placed throughout Israel.^{vii} If someone committed a crime or even if he accidentally killed someone, he was to flee to one of these cities of refuge. Otherwise, he could be killed by the nearest of kin who was taking revenge for the wrong committed. For the assumed guilty party, this was the only place of refuge and safety. Once there, he would be safe until proven guilty.

You and I are blood guilty before God. We are criminals before God. We deserve death. But God has given us an “out,” a place of refuge. It’s found in Jesus, who died a criminal’s death in our place. And as we flee to him, he becomes our refuge, a place of safety.

What more can he say, than to you he has said;
To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?

The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose
I will not, I will not, desert to its foes;

That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I’ll never, no, never, no, never forsake!

Next we have the image of an anchor. “We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure” (6:19a). We are like ships that have found a safe harbor. We have dropped our anchors by placing all of our hope in Christ.

Along the Mediterranean, harbors were quite shallow. Ships would often drop on anchor out the rear of the vessel and then float along a little until finally coming to a stop. At that point, a small boat would be lowered into the water, carrying a ‘fore anchor’ to the shore or to shallow water near the shore. This ‘fore anchor’ would be placed, if possible, on a rock, firmly securing the ship in the harbor. Whatever winds might buffet the ship, it remained secure being firmly anchored on land.

Jesus is like that. He is our anchor in the storms of life. As our hope is fixed firmly in him, he makes us “firm.” That carries the idea of something that doesn’t totter when put to the test. And he makes us “secure.” That carries the idea of something that doesn’t break down when stepped on.

But notice what happens to this anchor. The man in the boat who would take the “fore anchor” to shore was called a “forerunner.” And that is what Jesus is and does. He is like that man who jumps out of the boat with the “fore anchor.” But in this case, he takes our hope with him to the shores of heaven, even into the very presence of God. That’s what the next two verses say:

It [i.e. hope] enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek. Hebrews 6:19b-20

He has carried the anchor, which is our hope, into heaven. No matter what may come along our way, as long as the anchor of our hope remains firmly fixed on Christ in heaven, we are immovable. Why? Because he is our refuge, our anchor, and our High Priest. And as we place our trust in him, we have “stay-bility.”

ⁱ There is a progression in the promises given to Abraham.

- Genesis 12:1-3: Abraham will be a blessing, and all nations will be blessed in him.
- Genesis 13:14-17 After Abraham’s decision to give Lot his choice of land, God promises Abraham the *entire* land
- Genesis 22 Here, God adds the further aspect of ruling over his enemies.

The same is true in our salvation experience. God gives to all who believe the promise of eternal life. But as we act in obedience and persevere in God’s will, he gives further promises concerning reward and ruling with him in his promised Kingdom. All that God wants to give us is inherent in our salvation, a free gift of grace. Yet as we take steps of obedient faith, God lays before us the “full salvation” experience that He intended for us all along.

ⁱⁱ In the translation of the Old Testament that the writer to the Hebrews is using, those two little words “take possession” mean “inherit.” (cf. 6:12) And when will this promise be fulfilled? It will be realized in the coming Kingdom that Jesus Christ will establish on this earth. And it is in that Kingdom that all who are descendants of Abraham by faith and who have faithfully obeyed will rule with Christ, “taking possession of the cities.”

ⁱⁱⁱ There are two “unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie.” The first is his *promise*. God had already promised to Abraham many descendants (Genesis 12:1-3). But here he confirms that promise with an oath. This is the second unchangeable thing in which God cannot lie. After all, if God’s promise is unchangeable, how much more his oath! These verses are full of legal terminology that characterized the ancient Mediterranean world. The oaths given and received had two characteristics. First, they were marked by an appeal to someone who was higher in status. We do this all the time. People swear by someone or something greater than themselves. That’s why the oath of office for the Presidency is taken by placing one’s right hand on a Bible. But there is no one greater than God, so God swore by himself. Second, the oath brought about a type of assurance or confirmation that provided a legal guarantee of one’s truthfulness. George H. Guthrie, *The NIV Application Commentary: Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 241-42

^{iv} That’s why the speaker says in Hebrews 2:5 – “It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking. But there is a place where someone has testified: ‘What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the angels; you crowned him with glory and honor and put everything under his feet.’” It is saved mankind who will inherit the promises made to Abraham, and not angels.

^v If the promise is to be fulfilled ultimately in the coming Kingdom in which Christ himself will rule, how is it that Abraham “received” what was promised? There are two possible solutions. First, the same word “received” is used in Hebrews 11:33 where it is translated “*obtained* promises.” However, the word used in 6:15 and 11:33 is not the same as in Hebrews 11:13 (“All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not *receive* the

things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth.”) and 11:39 (“These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them *received* what had been promised.”). The word used in 6:15 and 11:33 means to “chance upon.” In other words, Abraham “came upon” the promise, or “received” the promise as a result of his patient endurance evidenced in obedience to God. So the verse seems to be saying simply that Abraham received the promise of future blessing, but not the realization of the promise. Another solution to the problem is understanding “received” (6:15) or “obtained” (11:33) in the sense of “making the promise one’s own.” In this case, Abraham’s patience and obedient faith was the means of making the promise his own. The application for you and me would be this: Whatever God allows into our lives, however difficult and however painful, we are called to endure. As we endure, we make God’s promise our own. We “obtain” or “receive” the promise. God works in each of our lives differently, but always very specifically and intentionally. That was the case for Abraham and it is the case for each of us.

^{vi} Charles H. Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening Daily Readings*, in *God’s Treasury of Virtues* (Tulsa, Okla.: Honor Books, 1995), 174-75 as cited by George H. Guthrie, *The NIV Application Commentary: Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 251.

^{vii} In fact, the same word “fled” is used in Deuteronomy 4:42 in describing the cities of refuge.