

THE HOPE OF HEBREWS

Hebrews 6:13-20

(some ideas and language borrowed from N.T. Wright, Hebrews for Everyone)

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Sir Frances Drake was an Englishman who became famous during the reign of Elizabeth I – he was born in 1540 and died in 1596. You know him for his adventures in sailing around the world, conducting numerous battles at sea. He was also twice a member of parliament, and, perhaps most famously, defeated the Spanish Armada, a fleet of warships, when it came to attack England in 1588. One of the funny stories about him is that he insisted on finishing a lawn game of bowls even after the Spanish Armada was seen approaching. He is quoted to have said, “We still have time to finish the bowling game and to thrash the Spaniards, too.” He then proceeded to finish the match, which he lost, before embarking on the fight with the Armada, which he won. (www.tradgames.org.uk/games/Bowls.htm) Or there is the story of him spreading his cloak over a mud puddle so that the queen could walk over it without getting her feet wet. Or how he once tried to claim California as a British possession.

While he is known for all those exploits and adventures, what’s he’s not known for is a little prayer which he wrote. It sums up the message of Hebrews 6. Sir Francis Drake wrote:

O Lord God, when thou givest to thy servants to endeavour any great matter, grant us also to know that it is not the beginning, but the continuing of the same, until it be thoroughly finished, which yieldeth the true glory; through him who for the finishing of thy work laid down his life for us, our Redeemer, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I don’t know if he was thinking about another dangerous sea voyage, but what he is saying is this: It’s not the beginning, important as it obviously is, but the continuing, carrying on until the thing is thoroughly finished, that really matters.

V. 11 – until the end.

We all start endeavors we never finish. Painting a picture. Reading a long and difficult book. A home improvement project. Painting the walls, but not being able to reach the ceiling. When something is really big, and really worthwhile, there are several steps in the process. There is the initial burst of enthusiasm and the excitement of something quite new, the gradual seeping away of energy as we reach the hard grind of carrying on, and then the days, and perhaps the weeks and even years, when we get out of bed without enthusiasm, without desire to work on the project, wishing we could have some other novelty to excite us, but realizing that there is a goal ahead which will make it all worthwhile if only we can put one foot in front of another until we get there.

As N.T. Wright has said, living the Christian life can be a lot like that. It was a lot like that for the readers of the book of Hebrews. They began well, they had an impressive track record with service

to God and to one another. In Hebrews 6:10, it looks like things are progressing nicely. But just because God has noted their good work didn't allow them to quit, to get lazy, or to give up.

There is always that strange balance between God's grace and our works when it comes to following Christ. The Reformation in the sixteenth century made it clear to us that grace is the only way that we find a place in the kingdom of God. God loves us, Christ died for us, and we receive the free grace. But at the same time do not the gospels, the teachings of the Lord, the writing of His brother James, make clear that if we've really received God's grace, then we will go to work for the kingdom of God? Living as a Christian has never been a matter of settling back and letting God do it all.

Maybe Paul catches it best when he tells the Philippians to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling, and then he adds, "because God is at work in you." Even the energy to do all that we are called to do comes itself from God working within us in the power of the Holy Spirit. (Tom Wright, *Hebrews for Everyone*, p. 60)

The example of perseverance he points out is good old Abraham. Look at verses 13-16.

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

The author of Hebrews is telling his readers where they can find their hope to persevere. In the moment of despair, they were ready to turn it all in and walk away from following Christ. They were ready to go back to Judaism. They had hopeless hearts.

I don't know what brings your sorrow today, your sense of hopelessness, your deepest despair. I don't know what it is that troubles your spirit, that keeps you awake at night, that makes you restless on your bed or pries open your eyelids. I don't know where your brokenness is found today – a broken financial future, a broken sense of security, a broken heart from a failed relationship, a broken soul brought about from the death of one so dear. But, just as the author writes to those early Jewish believers, you too hear His same words. Why can we, the followers of Christ, be the people of hope in the midst of hardship?

I. We find our hope in the greatness of God.

In fact, when describing God in Romans 15:13, Paul says, "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." God, for the apostle Paul, is the God of hope.

We find our hope in the greatness of God. Abraham is the very father of faith. He is the example of a man who received promises from God and lived in the good of those promises, persevering to the end in faith and hope.

Abraham waited so long – you remember – decades before the baby of the promise was born. How was God going to make him a great people? How was God going to form a nation from the patriarch if he didn't even have a son, an heir? In fact, poor Abraham was 100 years old when his son, Isaac, was born (Genesis 21:5).

And then, was he not a man of faith during the trial, when God asked him to offer his cherished son, Isaac, as a sacrifice on Mt. Moriah (Genesis 22)? Caught in the crisis of his love for his son and his love for his God, what was he to do? But Abraham believed that the promises of God could never fail. So, obediently, he raised the dagger to thrust into his son when God provided the lamb in the thicket.

When we swear, we swear by someone greater than ourselves. We call upon the authority and the greatness of a higher entity to undergird our promises. We will say, "I swear to...." Well, you know how we finish it – we finish it with the name of God. I'm not advising you to do that, but that is how oaths are made.

The Old Testament version of this might be, "As sure as Yahweh lives." That was the supreme oath of Israel. Abraham swore by God and made others do the same (Genesis 14:22; 21:23f; 24:3). But the writer of Hebrews says God has no one greater than Himself by which He can swear. So when God swears, He just says, "As I live" – for there is no one greater than He.

It happens in Genesis 22:16, when Abraham is willing to offer up Isaac. God says, "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 of the seashore."

It's kind of a comic picture. God looks around for someone greater than Himself to borrow their authority, to buttress His oath. God looks around and realizes there is no one greater than Himself, so he just swears by Himself. God's words are endorsed by His own character, and that's all He needs.

V. 18 – Two things: God's promise; God's oath.

What does he tell us Hebrews 6:18? He tells us that God's promise to take care of His people is an irrevocable promise because it is impossible for God to lie. God is the God of truth; He cannot lie.

While our hope is based upon the greatness of God,

II. Sometimes it wavers with the wait.

There is no more anxious position than waiting. Waiting. Waiting. Abraham and Sarah had to wait decades for the son of promise, the heir of God's word. Some of you here this morning are waiting. Waiting for the report from the biopsy. Waiting on the verdict from the court. Waiting on the soldier to come home from duty.

C. H. Spurgeon writes:

In verse 18, he tells us to take hold – that is, to grasp – hope. Sometimes as God’s people that’s all we can do – grasp hope.

Let’s look at our anchor of hope.

Verses 19-20.

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, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

Christ entered the presence of God. He went past the veil. He went past the curtain separating the sanctuary of God from the holy place in the Tabernacle. You remember, the high priest would only enter once a year on the Day of Atonement. Jesus, through His crucifixion and resurrection, has entered the heavenly sanctuary on our behalf.

He’s the “forerunner.” It’s the word for the military scouts that are moving ahead of the army, the word for the advance ships of a fleet, the word for the early-ripened fruit, or the word for the swiftest runner who breaks away from the group and wins the course.

Christ is the forerunner, entering into the presence of God on our behalf. In John 14:2-6, he told them, “ ‘I go and prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way where I am going.’ And Thomas said to Him, ‘Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me.’”

Paul calls Him the first fruits (1 Corinthians 15:20), and after the first fruits those who are His will join Him. He’s a high priest, after the order of the mysterious priest of the Old Testament, Melchizedek. He is our advocate. He safeguards the eternity of our souls. Christ didn’t go back to God, to heaven, just to reclaim His previous glory which He gave up at His incarnation. Rather, He went to sit at the right hand of God to intercede on our behalf as our anchor, as our hope, as our high priest. “These are my people, Father. They’ll be by My side.”

The author of Hebrews has said we are connected by a cable of faith to the Christ who is already in the kingdom and presence of God. Through the crucified and resurrected Christ, we are anchored to God – the God of the winds, the tides, the storms, and all that can shift and assault us.

You cannot live without an anchor of hope.

Alexandra M. Levine, a medical doctor in Los Angeles, writes about serving as a medical student on the general medicine ward. A 55-year-old woman was admitted to her care. She had a lesion on the right upper lobe of her lung. Her health basically looked good, and she was without symptoms. She spent the week going through the diagnostic studies. During that time, Alexandra – Dr. Levine – grew to know the patient. She was like family. A

dynamo. Vigorous. She kind of became an extra pair of hands on the ward. She passed out the meal trays and was running minor errands. The whole staff came to love her.

Well, the tests came back, revealing very little information. They were going to have to do surgery – exploratory surgery. And the surgery, unfortunately, showed that the cancer had gone too far. It was not resectable. A biopsy was taken, and the incision was simply closed.

Dr. Levine remembers dreading the next morning, afraid to see the patient. She didn't want to confront the patient she had grown to love. She didn't know what to say. She didn't know what words to use. So she just chose to wait. She went into the patient's room for the first time with the resident and interns. The resident stood at the side of her bed – think of that for a moment – stood there looking down at her, not looking at her. The resident said, "It's cancer. We couldn't really resect it, so we just opened and closed." "Open and closed," the patient asked? "Yes. It couldn't be removed, so we just closed." The patient just kept repeating the words to the doctor, to the resident. He kept nodding his head, confirming what he had said. "You mean you left the cancer there?" "Yes." She closed her eyes, said she was tired, and the team walked out of the room.

When Dr. Alexandra Levine went back to see her, the patient gave her a little small talk but, basically, she was not the same person. The med student remembers she was too young and inexperienced to know what to do. "I came in the next morning and learned that she had died during the night." She was taken to autopsy, but there was no specific cause of death. "I've never been able to get her words out of my mind," said Dr. Levine. "You opened and closed. You mean you left the cancer there?"

"I don't know why she died," says the doctor, "but if I'm honest with you, I think she died because all hope had been taken away. I believe that the key in that case was that the resident had said to her that she had cancer and that there was nothing that could be done. He obviously had taken her through a major operative procedure, and she had the pain and the scar to prove it, but nothing had been done – nothing at all. In fact, the resident didn't mention any other possible treatment. His words took away her hope, and I believe when he took away her hope he took away her potential at any more life."

"Should he have lied to the patient?" asked Dr. Levine. "No, I don't think so, but I do think that we can be sensitive. I do believe he didn't have to take away all possibility of hope." (Alexandra M. Levine, M.D., "The Importance of Hope," *West J Med* 1989 May, 150:609)

The people of God have the sure anchor of hope – Christ has died; He's emerged victorious; He sits at the right hand of the Father; and He holds the cable and He waits – He waits for us to join Him. Christians are the only people with the anchor of hope – the crucified and yes resurrected Christ.

Like Abraham, like the early believers receiving the letter of Hebrews, we, too, are called to wait, depend on the greatness of God, and, most of all, lay hold of the hope set before us – a crucified and resurrected Christ who has become our immovable anchor to eternity.