

"THE PROMISE AND THE OATH"

I. Introduction

- A. In the preceding paragraph of this chapter, the writer said that we need to have faith and patience if we want to inherit what God has promised in the gospel.
1. The Hebrew Christians were guilty of impatience.
 2. They were being impatient about the suffering that they were beginning to experience on account of their faith in Christ.
 3. They were thinking that perhaps Christianity wasn't worth it after all, that maybe they should just go back to plain old Judaism.
 4. They were doing the same thing that we so often do: responding to difficult circumstances by doubting the trustworthiness of God's promises.
- B. Here in the second half of chapter 6, the writer responds to this by showing that God's promises are worthy of our trust even when everything in our experience says that they are not.
1. As we study this passage tonight, I want us to see three things that it teaches us about God's promise.
 2. First, we will see that we have to wait to receive this promise.
 3. Second, we will see that it is a promise that God has guaranteed.
 4. And third, we will see that it is a promise about which we can have absolute certainty.

II. Waiting for the Promise (vv. 13-15)

- A. Our passage begins with the writer pointing us to Abraham as an example of one who patiently waited to inherit God's promise.
1. God made some big promises to Abraham.
 2. He promised that Abraham would have offspring, that Abraham's offspring would be as the stars of heaven and the sand on the seashore, and that all the families on the earth would be blessed in Abraham.
 3. Those promises were contrary to Abraham's experience.
 4. They were contrary to all reason.
 5. When these promises were first given, Abraham was seventy-five years old, and his wife Sarah was sixty-five.
 6. Sarah had been barren all her life, and she was now well beyond childbearing age.
 7. Yet Abraham patiently waited.
 8. He trusted in God's Word, and in time he obtained what he had been promised, or at least its beginning fulfillment.
 9. Twenty-five years after the promise was given, Sarah gave birth to Isaac.
- B. In verse 14, the writer cites a verse from Genesis 22, the passage where God tested Abraham's faith by commanding him to take Isaac and offer him as a sacrifice.
1. God wanted Abraham to demonstrate that he trusted in the certainty of the promise even when his circumstances told him that the promise could never be fulfilled.
 2. In the words of the Reformer Theodore Beza, when Abraham considered what God was commanding him to do he must have

thought, 'With Isaac dead, the covenant lies dead too.'

3. How would God fulfill his promise if Isaac was dead?
4. Abraham and Sarah would have no offspring and they were both well over one hundred years old.
5. This made it very hard to see how they could be made into a great nation and become a source of blessing to all people.

C. In spite of this, Abraham continued to trust in God's Word.

1. As the writer of Hebrews tells us in chapter 11, Abraham believed that God was able to raise Isaac from the dead.
2. And Abraham demonstrated his faith by doing what God commanded him to do.
3. He brought Isaac to Moriah and prepared to offer him as a sacrifice.
4. The only thing that prevented Abraham from going through with that sacrifice was that God intervened at the last moment and provided a ram to sacrifice in Isaac's place.
5. After all of this took place, the Lord said this to Abraham: "By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice." (Gen. 22:16-18)

D. Abraham's patient waiting for the fulfillment of God's promise is an example that all Christians need to imitate.

1. Abraham waited twenty-five years for Isaac's birth, and even after he was born he had to offer him back to the Lord in faith.

2. On top of that, Abraham never saw countless offspring in his lifetime.
3. He didn't live to see all the families of the earth blessed in him.
4. He was still waiting for the fulfillment of those things when he died.
5. The story of Abraham teaches us that true faith is characterized by patient waiting for the fulfillment of God's promises.
6. You are not going to receive the fullness of God's gospel promises in this life.
7. You are not going to have your best life now.
8. Instead, all throughout your life, in one way or another, the Lord is going to require you to trust him to keep his promises in spite of circumstances that suggest otherwise.
9. John Calvin puts it well when he writes, "In this way ought glory to be given to God; we must quietly hope for what he does not as yet show to our senses, but hides from us, and for a long time defers, in order that our patience may be exercised."
10. It is not easy for us to have this kind of patience, but when we keep our eyes fixed upon what it is that God has promised in the gospel, we are assured that it is worth waiting for.

III. A Guaranteed Promise (vv. 16-18)

- A. We turn now to consider how the Lord guarantees his promise.
 1. The writer says that God guaranteed his promise by adding an oath to it.
 2. As we learned in Sunday School this morning, an oath is made when we call upon God as the witness of something that we are

asserting or promising.

3. The reason why we swear oaths is because people often fail to keep their word.
 4. The reason why we swear oaths in God's name is because we need to be held accountable by One who is greater than we are, One who knows all things.
 5. The fact that there is no one greater than God meant that he did not have anyone greater than himself to swear by.
 6. So he told Abraham, "By myself I have sworn..."
 7. He swore by his own name.
 8. But this does not diminish the significance of God's oath.
 9. On the contrary, it heightens it.
 10. What oath could be greater than one in which God, who cannot lie, swears by his own holy name?
- B. The writer tells us that God swore this oath because he "desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose."
1. In other words, God swore this oath for our benefit.
 2. We are the heirs of the promise.
 3. As Paul says in Galatians 3, "if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise." (v. 29)
- C. We should also consider the significance of the phrase, "the unchangeable character of God's purpose."
1. The word 'purpose' is referring to God's eternal counsel.

2. The gospel announces the plan that God established before the creation of the world.
 3. This further underscores the trustworthiness of God's promise.
 4. While man's purposes are often thwarted and frequently changed, God's purposes never change and they never fail.
- D. It is utterly amazing that God would be willing to take an oath in order to guarantee his promise.
1. I would imagine that most of us can think of people whom we would be willing to take at their word, people whom we trust to follow through with what they say.
 2. If we are willing to take some people at their word, we should certainly be willing to take God at his word.
 3. God is entitled to expect that we will believe him when he promises us something.
 4. But his love for us causes him to give up that right.
 5. In Calvin's words, "we may hence also conclude what great account [God] makes of our salvation; for in order to secure it, he not only pardons our unbelief, but giving up as it were his own right, and yielding to us far more than what we could claim, he kindly provides a remedy for it."
 6. God accommodates himself to our weakness by guaranteeing his promise with an oath.
- E. The fact that God has given us this guarantee provides us with strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.
1. The writer makes use of a fitting image when he describes Christians as those who have fled for refuge.

2. Every Christian is a refugee.
3. By God's grace, we have seen that Christ is our only place of safety.
4. We have taken shelter under his wings.
5. This is the essence of faith — putting all of our trust in Christ alone.
6. And we have a strong encouragement to keep on relying on Christ because of two unchangeable things: God's promise and his oath.
7. Both are absolutely immutable, because both have been given to us by the God of truth.

IV. A Certain Promise (vv. 19-20)

- A. This brings us to the last part of the passage, where we see that God's promise is a certain promise.
 1. Listen again to verses 19-20: "We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek."
 2. This image of a sure and steadfast anchor for our souls is an image upon which we should frequently meditate.
 3. We need the kind of stability that this image sets forth.
 4. We need it because, at the end of the day, everything in this world is unstable.
 5. The only way we will ever find true stability is by relying on God's promise.
 6. John Calvin offers some helpful reflections upon this imagery, and I want to quote him at length.

7. He writes, "It is a striking likeness when he compares faith leaning on God's word to an anchor; for doubtless, as long as we sojourn in this world, we stand not on firm ground, but are tossed here and there as it were in the midst of the sea, and that indeed very turbulent; for Satan is incessantly stirring up innumerable storms, which would immediately upset and sink our vessel, were we not to cast our anchor fast in the deep. For nowhere a haven appears to our eyes, but wherever we look water alone is in view; yea, waves also arise and threaten us; but as the anchor is cast through the waters into a dark and unseen place, and while it lies hid there, keeps the vessel beaten by the waves from being overwhelmed; so must our hope be fixed on the invisible God... As the cable also by which the anchor is suspended joins the vessel with the earth through a long and dark intermediate space, so the truth of God is a bond to connect us with himself, so that no distance of place and no darkness can prevent us from cleaving to him. Thus when united to God, though we must struggle with continual storms, we are yet beyond the peril of shipwreck... It may indeed be that by the violence of the waves the anchor may be plucked off, or the cable be broken, or the beaten ship be torn to pieces. This happens on the sea; but the power of God to sustain us is wholly different, and so also is the strength of hope and the firmness of his word."
 8. If you have Jesus Christ as the anchor of your soul, you can know for certain that you are beyond the peril of shipwreck.
 9. No matter how unstable the ground beneath your feet may seem at any given moment, you are standing upon the Rock.
- B. The writer underscores the certainty of God's promise by telling us that this anchor of our soul is resting in the heavenly holy of holies.
1. Jesus is our anchor, and he is in the presence of God on our behalf.
 2. He is our forerunner, appearing before God in our glorified human nature, guaranteeing that we too will be admitted into the presence of God's glory.
 3. Jesus is in God's presence as our eternal high priest.

4. Because he is there interceding on our behalf, we have the assurance that nothing can ever shake us.

V. Conclusion

- A. We are not yet in full possession of what God has promised in the gospel.
- B. Like Abraham, we have to patiently wait to obtain what God has promised us.
- C. And the wonderful thing is that God has done for us exactly what he did for Abraham.
- D. He has added his oath to his promise.
- E. He has given us the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper as his oath-signs.
- F. The sacraments assure us that God will make good on everything that he has promised us.
- G. As the Scottish minister Robert Bruce once explained, "to help this astonishing weakness in which we are ready to distrust God in every Word, He has annexed His Sacrament to His Word... God does not only speak, He swears, but this is for the sake of our weakness and infirmity." [*The Mystery of the Lord's Supper*, 62]
- H. So as we celebrate the Lord's Supper this evening, consider what this oath-sign tells you about the kindness and mercy of your God.
- I. Let this be a great encouragement to your faith, so that you, like Abraham, may patiently wait, and obtain what God has promised.