

WHEN GOD SWEARS

Hebrews 6:9-20

The recipients of the book of Hebrews were not in a good place spiritually. They were saved but they were spiritual babies. They had become “dull of hearing” and were dangerously vulnerable to their enemies. The Preacher was concerned lest they fall away, recant their faith in Christ and fail to go on to spiritual maturity (5:11-6:8). Having delivered a stern warning about the consequences of falling away, he softens his tone to encourage his brothers and sisters to go on to spiritual maturity.

Sluggish or Earnest? (6:9-12)

Hebrews 6:9–12 (ESV)

⁹ Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things— things that belong to salvation. ¹⁰ For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do. ¹¹ And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, ¹² so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

In verse 9, the Preacher expresses confidence that these believers (*beloved*) will go on to spiritual maturity and produce the works of salvation; that they will be the land that produces a crop rather than thorns and thistles (6:7-8).

His confidence for their future is based on their past. Though they were struggling at the time the book of Hebrews was written, they had experienced better days in the past and God doesn't forget what we do for Him.

But now they need to renew their commitment to Christ and go on to spiritual maturity. In verses 11-12 the Preacher expresses three things he desires for them.

First, he desires that they *show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end*. Spiritual growth never “just happens”; it is the result of time and energy focused on the Word of God, meditation, prayer, service etc. When we put energy into our spiritual life it deepens our convictions and our confidence in God's plan and promises. That's what the Preacher means by *the full assurance of hope*. He wants them to have that settled confidence that comes from knowing God's Word.

Second, the Preacher doesn't want them to remain *sluggish*. The word *sluggish* is the same word used in 5:11 meaning *dull of hearing*. He wants them to be earnest in their faith, not sluggish.

Third, the Preacher wants them to become *imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises*. He wants them to trust God over the long haul like Abraham did and Noah and Moses and all those he'll list in chapter 11. Through faith and patience these people inherited God's promises. The promise, in this context for the Hebrew believers, is to attain spiritual maturity in this life and rewards for the Kingdom in the next life. If they want to mature and receive reward they need to persevere in faith.

But to persevere is to be persecuted.

What encouragement can the Preacher give that the suffering is worth it?

God's Promises Never Fail (6:13-20)

It took 25 years for Abraham to receive what God promised, but he received it!

Hebrews 6:13–15 (ESV)

¹³ For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, ¹⁴ saying, “Surely I will bless you and multiply you.” ¹⁵ And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise.

Abraham was 75 years old when God promised him a son and he was 100 years old when Isaac was born. That's a long time to wait and believe. The Hebrew Christians could totally relate.

And as Jews they grew up celebrating Abraham's faith. They would agree that Abraham should have waited patiently because *God* had made the promise and God does not lie. What is more, God swore an oath when He made the promise! They would absolutely agree Abraham should have waited patiently because God is absolutely trustworthy.

In the same way and for the same reasons they themselves should wait patiently for God to fulfill His promises to them!

This is where the Preacher is going in verses 16-18.

Hebrews 6:16–18 (ESV)

¹⁶ For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. ¹⁷ So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, ¹⁸ so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.

We are not so much an oath-taking culture as perhaps was first century Jewish culture. But we understand the point: when a man swears by something greater than himself he is pledging himself to fulfill his promise. God could not appeal to a higher authority so He swore by Himself. He staked His reputation on fulfilling His promise to bless and multiply Abraham and Abraham's descendants.

The two unchangeable things are 1) God's promise (He gave His word) and 2) God's oath (He swore by Himself). How certain, in light of these two unchangeable things, could Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their descendants be that God will bless them and multiply them? This absolute confidence in the promise of God to Abraham was a central tenet of the Jewish faith and worldview.

Again, the Preacher is encouraging his readers to have the same confidence in Christ as their High Priest because not only did God promise that the Messiah would be a High Priest, but He guaranteed it with an oath! What he has in mind and what he will make explicit in 7:21 is God's promise and oath to the Messiah recorded in Psalm 110:4.

Psalms 110:4 (ESV)

⁴ The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, “You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.”

If God's promise and oath to Abraham was absolutely trustworthy then God's promise and oath to Messiah is equally and as certainly trustworthy.

This is the reason they need to hold fast to Christ to whom they have fled for refuge. We cannot develop this here, but the mention of refuge is a reference to the cities of refuge God provided to protect the innocent. Similarly, Jesus is their refuge as they live in a hostile, hateful world patiently waiting for the Kingdom.

Finally, the hope to which they should hold fast is not a principle, but a Person. Their hope and ours is Christ our High Priest Who not only offered the perfect sacrifice for sins in the heavenly Holy of Holies, but Who continues to intercede for us before the Throne.

Hebrews 6:19–20 (ESV)

¹⁹ We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, ²⁰ where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

How can believers in Christ be certain that God's promises to us will come to pass? We can be certain because Jesus is in heaven functioning as our High Priest. The promise God made to Messiah and guaranteed with an oath God has fulfilled. Our High Priest is our hope that all God's promises to us will be fulfilled. Jesus is also the guarantee that we will be in Heaven; He is a *forerunner* with many to follow.

Why can we be sure of these things?

Because God swore!