

Hebrews 6:9-20      “Inheriting the Promises”  
Genesis 22  
Psalm 105

February 28, 2021

Soren Kierkegaard once tried to figure out what was going on in Abraham’s head.  
He retells the story, over and over again, trying to make sense of what happened.

How do you make sense of God’s command?  
    “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love,  
    and go to the land of Moriah,  
    and offer him there as a burnt offering...”

Shouldn’t Abraham have said, “No, LORD, that is against your holy will!”?

If you try to put yourself in Abraham’s place,  
    there is no way to retell the story that makes any sense whatsoever!

When God told Abraham to take his only son, Isaac—the promised son—  
    and offer him as a sacrifice,  
    what did Abraham think?

Did Abraham say, “Well, there go God’s promises!”?  
    No—because Abraham had faith.

Did Abraham say, “God really doesn’t mean this!”?  
    No—because Abraham believed God.

And God had promised to Abraham that *through Isaac* his seed would be reckoned.  
    Look back at Genesis 21:12 –  
    “Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you,  
    *for through Isaac shall your offspring be named.*”

In other words, Abraham *knew* that Isaac would grow up and have children.  
Therefore, he *knew* that whatever God had in mind would not *end* with Isaac’s death.

Kierkegaard can only conclude:  
    “‘No one was as great as Abraham. Who is able to understand him?’” (p14)

There is no good way of getting inside Abraham’s mind.  
    But Abraham was convinced that God would be faithful to his promise—  
    and so he did not withhold Isaac, but obeyed God’s word,  
    trusting that God would do right.

God’s promises are certain.  
    You can trust that he will do what he has said.

Sing Psalm 105  
Read Hebrews 5:7-6:20

Last week we looked at the warning against apostasy—  
how there are those who only believe for a time—  
who taste of the heavenly gift,  
share in the Holy Spirit,  
and even partake of the powers of the age to come,  
but who fall away.  
They are like a supposedly fertile field that produces thorns and thistles—  
it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.

But Hebrews does not leave us in despair.  
Having set forth the danger of apostasy,  
he now launches into a discourse on the certainty of God's promises.

And he starts with Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac.

We have entered the central section of Hebrews (5:11-10:39).  
It begins and ends with exhortations (5:11-6:12 and 10:19-39),  
both dealing with the danger of apostasy.

The heart of this central section of Hebrews  
is an exposition of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as high priest.  
Having rooted Christ's high priestly work firmly in his identity as the Son of God,  
both in his deity and in his humanity,  
he now explains what that priestly work is all about.  
Hebrews is the only author in the NT to call Jesus a "high priest."  
Indeed, never, outside of Hebrews, is Jesus called a "priest" at all.  
In 1 Cor 5:7 Paul refers to Jesus as our Passover sacrifice,  
and there are several references to Jesus work in sacrificial terms.  
But only the book of Hebrews explores how Christ served as a priest.

### **1. The Promise and the Oath (Abraham)—6:13-16**

As is often the case,  
Hebrews ends the previous paragraph with a nice transition:  
"So that you may not be sluggish,  
but imitators of those who through faith and patience  
inherit the promises."

Now, who is this referring to?  
Who, through faith and patience inherited the promises?

Abraham.

[read 13-14]

<sup>13</sup> For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, <sup>14</sup> saying, “Surely I will bless you and multiply you.”

This is a quotation from Genesis 22.

God’s initial blessing of Abraham can be found in Genesis 12,  
when he called Abraham out of Haran and sent him to the Promised Land.

*Now the LORD said<sup>[a]</sup> to Abram, “Go from your country<sup>[b]</sup> and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup> And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Gen 12:1-3)*

God’s covenant with Abraham can be found in Genesis 15,  
when God (literally) “cut” a covenant with Abraham.

This covenant was confirmed by the sign of circumcision in Genesis 17,  
where the word covenant appears no less than thirteen times.

All of this is sometimes called God’s promise to Abraham:  
Land, Seed, and the Blessing to the Nations.

All of which are the result of God’s *presence* with Abraham.

At the beginning of Genesis 21 we hear that the LORD “did to Sarah as he had promised”  
and she conceived and bore a son.

Here in Genesis 22, however, God goes beyond “promising.”

How is it possible to speak of God going “beyond” promising!

When God promises something, how much more certain can it get?

And yet, after promising to Abraham that Isaac was the promised seed,  
God now swears by himself that he will do what he has already promised to do.

When God says that he will do something, you cannot doubt that he will do it.

His word is most certainly going to come to pass.

Indeed, that is why Abraham was willing to offer his son, Isaac.

He was confident that God would keep his promise.

He did not know *how* God would keep his promise,

but as Hebrews says later in chapter 11,

Abraham was convinced that God could even raise his son from the dead.

But God now goes a step beyond a promise,  
and swears an oath.

What is the difference between a promise and an oath?

A promise is a simple commitment.

When I make a promise, I commit to doing something.  
If I don't do it, then I have failed to keep my word.  
And that is bad.  
Someone who fails to keep their word is unreliable.

When I swear an oath, I also commit to doing something.  
But in an oath, I not only commit to do something,  
I also commit myself to certain penalties if I fail to do it.

A good example of an oath is in the courtroom.  
I promise, before God, to tell the truth,  
with the penalty of perjury if I do not.  
If I lie and perjure myself, then I will be punished  
The oath carries with it a "self-malediction"—  
in other words, I'm saying, may bad things happen to me if I do not do what I say.

When I was growing up you would hear children on the playground saying,  
"cross myself and hope to die" –  
(in other words, may I die if I am not telling the truth).  
That is a self-malediction.  
Bringing a curse upon myself if I am now lying.

(I sometimes wonder if the current cultural collapse is due – in part –  
to all those children uttering that oath –  
and God holding them to their words!)

So when God swears by himself in Gen 22:16-17, and says  
"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,"  
God is saying, "may bad things happen to me if I do not bless you."

Psalm 105, which we sang earlier, speaks of this in verses 8-11.  
"He remembers his covenant forever,  
the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations,  
the covenant that he made with Abraham,  
his sworn promise to Isaac,  
which he confirmed to Jacob as a statute,  
to Israel as an everlasting covenant."

Psalm 105 is a pretty cheerful Psalm.  
It remembers God's faithfulness in delivering his people from Egypt,  
according to his sworn promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.  
It concludes with God's faithfulness in providing for Israel in the wilderness.

There is no mention of the rebellion in the wilderness  
(That is the job of Psalm 106!)

The point of Psalm 105 is that God was faithful to his promises.  
He lived up to his word.  
God had promised.  
He had even sworn an oath.  
And he did what he said.

This is the basic point of Hebrews 6:13-14.  
God not only made a promise to Abraham,  
but he even swore an oath by himself saying,  
“Surely I will bless you and multiply you.”

*15 and thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise.*

You are not to be sluggish,  
but you are to imitate Abraham—  
the one who through faith and patience inherits the promises.  
How did Abraham demonstrate faith and patience?  
Through his obedience to God,  
even when he wasn't sure how God would remain faithful to his promises.  
Abraham obtained the promise through faith and patience.  
He did not insist on knowing exactly *how* God would be faithful to his promises.  
He trusted God's promise in spite of his own uncertainty,  
because he knew that God had promised.

But then God did more than promise.  
He swore an oath.  
And Hebrews recognizes how odd this is.

*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.*

It is not the case that an oath is more binding than a promise.  
Your word is your word.  
(Indeed, this is why Jesus says “let your yes be yes and your no be no.”  
The idea that your word isn't binding without an oath  
comes from the evil one)  
But an oath provides for specific penalties for the breaking of a promise.

God has promised that he will fulfill his promise to Abraham.

But to confirm the unchangeable character of his promise,  
he has sworn an oath—  
in effect saying, “may I cease to be God if I do not keep my promise.”

18 *So by two unchangeable things [his promise and his oath], 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.*

## 2. The Promise and the Oath (Jesus)—6:17-18

I thought we were talking about Abraham and the oath that God swore to Abraham!  
Suddenly Hebrews makes it clear that he’s talking about us!

There is a lot of legal language in verses 17-18.

“Unchangeable” (verse 17) is from a Greek word used regularly in wills to refer to a provision that could not be revoked or altered.

“Guaranteed” is a word that in legal lingo meant “surety” or “guarantee.”  
(We still use this in loans, where if you are a cosigner – you are the “surety” – the one who guarantees that the loan will be paid).

God has not only spoken his promise.  
He has also sworn his oath.

And the oath that he has sworn is foreshadowed in the offering of Isaac.  
He has provided a guarantee—a surety—involving a self-maledictory oath.  
Abraham inherited the promise through faith and patience,  
because God delivered his son from death.  
We inherit the promise through faith and patience,  
because God has delivered his Son *through* death.  
The oath that God swore required nothing less than the death *and resurrection* of Jesus.

God’s promise is the first thing that is the ground of our hope,  
but Hebrews says that our hope enters into the inner place behind the curtain.  
Abraham’s surety was the oath spoken by the Angel of the LORD,  
combined with the blood of the ram.

That was the guarantee to Abraham that God would be faithful.

Our surety—our guarantee—is the fulfillment of that oath,  
when, beyond all our expectation,  
the self-malediction of God came true:

God had said, in effect, may I be cursed –  
may I cease to be God, if I do not fulfill my promise to Abraham.

But here's the problem:

Abraham's heirs were not very good at faith and patience!

We heard about that in Hebrews 3-4 –

“as I swore in my wrath, they shall not enter my rest.”

If God is going to wait for humanity to succeed at faith and patience,  
then God will never fulfill his promise to Abraham!

The only way for God to be faithful to his promise,  
was for the Word to become flesh and dwell among us.

In these last days God has spoken to us in his Son.

We saw last week (from verse 10) that “God is not so unjust as to overlook your work  
and the love that you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do.”

Note well: that is not your confidence.

The guarantee (or surety) of God's promise—and of your salvation—  
is not your work.

The guarantee – the surety – is Jesus Christ—

more precisely, it is the sacrifice of Jesus,

as he presents himself before the Father in the heavenly Holy of Holies.

### **3. Hope, the Anchor of the Soul—6:19-20**

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 Mechizedek.*

The anchor of your soul, through which you inherit the promises,  
is that hope that enters the Holy of Holies.

Please understand that for Hebrews, “hope” is not an abstract concept.

For us – we talk about our hopes in such flimsy ways:

“I hope it doesn't snow again this year” –

when you know full well that it's going to snow again!

No, for Hebrews, the *hope* that enters the Holy of Holies is Jesus.

After all, it is not an abstract concept that enters the inner place behind the veil.

It is not an abstract concept that sits on the right hand of the Father.

It is Jesus.

Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness.

In the OT, the high priest went into the earthly holy of holies once a year on behalf of his people,  
bearing the blood of the covenant—the sacrifice for their sins.

But now, Jesus has gone as high priest into the heavenly holy of holies,  
bearing his own blood—the blood of the new covenant—the final sacrifice for sin.

Your confidence—what enables you to hold fast to God’s promises,  
is not rooted in anything in you.

Your confidence is Jesus Christ.  
He is your sure and steadfast anchor.

This is why Hebrews can speak so boldly of how God views your work and love.

When God says that “God is not so unjust as to overlook your work”,  
we have a hard time believing this.

We know that we’re sinners, so our (quite natural) response is to say,  
if God is just then he would condemn me for my sin!

But if the High Priest has brought the final, cleansing sacrifice into the heavenly Holy of Holies—  
the sacrifice that once for all deals with every single sin—  
then God, in his justice, may not overlook your work.

This leaves no place for boasting.

It is, after all, solely God’s work of grace.

Your hope, your confidence, your righteousness,  
is solely Jesus Christ.

He is sure and steadfast anchor.

If you rely upon any other,  
and especially if you rely upon yourself,  
you will drift away (remember 2:1?)

“We must hold fast to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it”?

Jesus is the only anchor of the soul.

But your anchor is not something that weighs you down.

It is something that lifts you up!

Your anchor is firmly rooted in the heavens.

That is where you are moored.

This is why you may have confidence that through faith and patience  
you will inherit the promises.

Christ has tethered you to himself.

Hold fast to him, and he will bring you through all storms to himself.