

A Better Hope and a Better Promise

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[0 : 00] So, if you'd like to open your Bibles then, have your Bibles open at Hebrews chapter 6. We're going to resume our studies in the book of Hebrews, in fact for the next Sunday evening, starting this evening.

And in the next few chapters, the writer is going to tell us all that is better about the new covenant. Having started in the first few chapters telling us about the importance of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, but also the human Saviour, he's now going to sort of expand this idea and go on to talk about what is better about the new covenant.

And it really starts from this chapter 6. But verses 4 to 6 of this passage are really quite shocking. And indeed, one commentary I looked at said, possibly this passage has caused more alarm amongst, I can't remember the exact word, but alarm and confusion among Christians than almost any other passage of the New Testament.

It is quite shocking. We need to look and see what is really being said here. Because is this salvation to be found in Jesus Christ, is it so fragile, so easily thrown away?

Doesn't the Bible teach us once saved, always saved? I believe the Bible does teach that, but with certain qualifications. Is God really able to keep us?

[1 : 30] Or are we committed to a life of constant fearfulness when one slip might throw away all that we've achieved so far? Is one slip going to doom us forever?

But actually, as we read on the passage, that's not the writer's intention at all. He wants his readers and us to have assurance and maturity.

That's the way he starts the chapter, saying go on to maturity. But that assurance has to be well founded. And as we were thinking this morning, that maturity has to be a result of healthy growth. So before he can remind us of the certainty of God's promise, the writer needs to give us a warning about the dangers of a full start. And so we're going to look then at this passage under those three headings that I put there on the slide.

Verses 4 to 6, an important warning. Verses 9 to 12, then we'll go on and look at a better hope. And verses 19 to 30, we'll go on and look at a better promise.

[2 : 34] Verses 9 to 12, then we'll go on and look at a better hope.

And it really is quite stark and quite graphic. And the word that most of our English translators call, translators enlightened, is actually the Greek word photizo.

And it literally means to shine a light on something. But as in Greek, as in English, it's used metaphorically to talk about the light of understanding and coming to understand and appreciate and see something, seeing some new truth.

And certainly when it's used in a spiritual sense in the New Testament, it normally does refer to saving knowledge. And that's what, of course, has caused such confusion among Christians over this passage.

But actually, the writer says even more than that, because in verses 4b to 5, he says, they've shared in the Holy Spirit. They've tasted the goodness of the word of God, and they've tasted the powers of the coming age.

[4 : 12] Exactly what that means perhaps is not clear, but it must mean some of the working of the Holy Spirit among these, even in this world, that foreshadows the powers of the coming age.

So he says they've been enlightened, they've shared in the Holy Spirit, tasted the goodness of the word of God, and the powers of the coming age. And yet for them, it seems, it's all useless.

In fact, verse 6 seems to imply that it's quite positively harmful. One might remember the words of the disciples on being told that it's hard for the witch to enter the kingdom of heaven.

And they said, who then can be saved? One might say the same thing. These people appear to have spiritual witches of some sort, and yet it all comes to nothing. How can this be?

Thank you. Perhaps there's a hint in verse 8 with its oblique reference to the parable of the sower, and we'll look at that shortly. But we need to look very closely at the text here, and we need to investigate this further so that we don't get the wrong end of the stick, and we don't become discouraged when we don't need to be, but at the same time, we do take fair warning, and we do make sure that we're not part of this group of people that the writer is talking about.

[5 : 36] So we do have this imagery of a burnt land, a land that cannot bring forth crops, that you can try and plant stuff, but nothing grows there because it's just too dry and burnt.

Jesus just picked this up in the parable of the sower, but that's certainly not the first reference to this imagery. All through the Old Testament, this idea of a burnt land comes through, and in fact, right back in Deuteronomy, and if you want to look it up, I'll read these out, but if you want to look them up, I'll put the references and the page numbers, which will be roughly right, I hope, on the slide there.

So in Deuteronomy chapter 29, we find the Israelites exhorted by Moses to commit fully to the Lord, and Moses talks here about a person who hears the words of this oath and invokes a blessing on himself and thinks, I will be safe.

Exactly what it says is this. When a person hears the words of this oath, he invokes a blessing on himself and therefore thinks, I will be safe, even though I persist in going my own way.

This will bring disaster on the watered land as well as the dry. The Lord will never be willing to forgive him. His wrath and zeal will burn against that man.

[7 : 02] All the curses written in this book will fall upon him, and the Lord will blot out his name from under heaven. So he's talking about those who presume on the goodness of God and assume they'll be okay and blessed, even though they persist in going their own way.

A few verses later, we meet this idea of a burning land. The result of this disobedience, we find from verse 23, The whole land will be a burning waste of salt and sulfur, nothing planted, nothing sprouting, no vegetation growing on it.

It will be like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admar and Zeboim, which the Lord overthrew in fierce anger. If you're not familiar with the story, they seem to, the cities of the plain were destroyed by sulfur, some sort of volcanic event or something of that nature.

So what does this tell us? That merely hearing the words of the oath will not do. In fact, it's worse than useless because it brings the curse upon us.

So heartfelt obedience is required. And as I say this, this thought runs all the way through the Old Testament. So centuries later, Isaiah was writing of Judah, described here as the Lord's vineyard.

[8 : 27] In Isaiah chapter 5, verses 5 and 6, we read what the Lord is going to do to his vineyard, a vineyard that he'd planted but was not bringing forth fruit.

So what's he going to do about it? I'll tell you what I'm going to do to my vineyard. I will take away its hedge and it will be destroyed. I will break down its wall and it will be trampled.

I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briars and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it. This was because of their disobedience.

They had heard the law, they had heard the promise, they had heard the blessings. But instead of realizing that this required them to walk in the Lord's way, they instead just presumed on it, thought, well, the Lord loves us, it's going to be all right.

And they were sorely mistaken. But actually, the Old Testament goes even further than that. There are examples, several examples actually, in the Old Testament of prophets who had real enlightenment from the Holy Spirit, perhaps one might have said, who had endured the powers of the world to come.

[9 : 40] Yet in the end, they were disobedient. Now, I was tempted to trace them all through, but that would take a long time, so I'm not going to do that. I'm just going to give you, perhaps, the most famous example of all.

And that most famous example is Balaam. And Balaam was around at the time of the Exodus, when the Jewish people were about to enter the Promised Land. And Balak, king of Moab, on the borders of the Promised Land, saw this vast crowd of people arriving and thought, I better do something about this, I don't like this.

And so what he did was he hired a prophet, a prophet Balaam, to curse the Israelites. But God spoke to Balaam, and it's quite clear in Numbers 22, 22, God did speak to him. God said to Balaam, do not go with them. You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed. But Balaam wasn't too happy about this, because he wasn't going to get his fee. And so there was a kind of discussion with God. And in the end, God said, okay, you can go then. And when he went, he saw the Israelites. And, but instead of cursing them, when he saw them, the Spirit of God again spoke to him.

[11 : 07] And this is what he said, how can I curse those whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce those whom the Lord has not denounced? From the rocky peaks, I see them.

From the heights, I view them. I see people who live apart and do not consider themselves one of the nations. Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part of Israel?

Let me die the death of the righteous, and may my end be like theirs. That's what he said. Let me die the death of the righteous, and may my end be like theirs.

He understood what God was doing. God had spoken to him. Balaam was a real prophet. He wasn't one who just made up things in order to, you know, in order to get money or to get respect.

He really had heard from God. And later on, he even prophesied that an Israelite leader would come and destroy the kingdom of Moab. So he knew what God was doing.

[12 : 08] But what did he do about it? What he should have done, of course, gone to his employer, Balak, and told them that his only hope was to submit to the Lord, to pray to the Lord forgiveness, and make peace with the people of Israel.

But he didn't do that at all. What he actually did, and it's not entirely clear in numbers, as it's kind of hinted at, but Revelation makes this clear that he was responsible for it.

What he actually did instead was he said, well, I can only curse them if the Lord has cursed them, so they better have something for God to curse them about. So what he did was tell Balak to get his women folk to seduce the Israelite men.

And then perhaps the blessing of God might be turned aside. And so in the New Testament, Balaam stands as the seducer. And in the letter to Pergamon in the book of Revelation, chapter 2, verse 14, it says, you have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who have taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality.

So Balaam had had spiritual enlightenment of a sort, and yet in the end, he was not saved, he was not found as part of the people of God.

[13 : 34] Having said, let me die the death of the righteous and may my end be like theirs, he didn't answer, as it were, his own prayer and he turned instead to wickedness.

And we find similar warnings, don't we, in the teaching of Jesus himself. So his well-known parable of the sower, the parable of the sower is the parable of a farmer who sows seed and some falls on good ground, some falls on bad ground and Jesus says that the seed is the word of God and it's, well, in Matthew chapter 13, 20 to 22, Jesus is explaining the parable to his disciples and he says this, the one who received the seed, that is the word of God, the one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy but since he has no root he lasts only a short time when trouble or persecution comes because of the word he quickly falls away the one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the one who hears the word but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it making it unfruitful.

Sometimes the word of God is preached and people seem to receive it with joy but sometimes you're a little worried aren't you? is it really shallow or has it really taken root?

And yet they did initially receive it with joy and some yes received the word and it even started to grow in their hearts but they hadn't counted the cost and the worries of this life and the pleasures the deceitfulness of wealth stop it growing properly.

So Jesus warns that there are those who will appear to receive the word at first but it doesn't really take root in their hearts and lives. And in fact in Matthew 7 chapter 21 to 23 we hear find something even more stark and this is Jesus talking about the last judgment and he says not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

[16 : 09] Many will say to me on that day Lord, Lord did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles? Then I will tell them plainly I never knew you away from me you evildoers.

So some enlightenment is not evidence of saving faith at all and that's what we need to be clear on. You may be aware that Richard Dawkins has described religion as a virus of the mind he meant that as a criticism but actually I think he's got a point actually.

Religion Christianity certainly does indeed transform the mind to its own worldview we were looking at Romans chapter 12 verse 2 this morning your mind should be transformed by the word of Christ in it and that is rather like a virus actually a virus subverts the chemistry of the cell to its own purposes anyway why am I saying this?

Well what's the best protection against getting a viral disease? Well it's vaccination isn't it? How does vaccination work? Well you get a weakened dose of the virus of the pathogen you inject this weakened dose into the patient and this kicks the patient's immune system to produce antibodies against it and that makes it impossible to catch the real disease and sometimes it has to be said that the word of God does work like that just as it was to those people Moses was talking about sometimes they hear part of it a weakened form of it and it actually vaccinates them against catching the real thing I think that does happen some people lament the disappearance of Christian assemblies from our schools well I have to say that my experience of Christian assemblies at school was that it was just like giving them a vaccination against real

Christianity it was such a denuded and weakened form of it that did more harm than good I suspect anyway that's as far as it may but what we're saying here is that sometimes the word of God instead of growing up and taking real root actually hardens people against it and they the very act of rejection they invoke that covenant curse on themselves as Judas did when he betrayed Jesus and I think to get back to our passage Hebrews 6 verse 6 suggests that this is the sort of person that that the writer is really talking about he talks about those who have hardened themselves and now are standing against Christ to crucify him again as it were at least metaphorically and stand against him they invoking the covenant curse on themselves like Judas remember what Jesus said to Judas it would be better it would be better if you'd never been born you're worse off than if you'd actually never heard the message at all so what do we make of this then are we to live in constant fear and paranoia we might say well I think one thing that's worth saying is if you're worried about this then you're probably not one of the people that the writer is talking about he's talking about those who have hardened themselves against the gospel but still we do need to take the warning take it seriously and just remind ourselves that you know these things miracles prophecies

[19:58] Jesus says are perfectly compatible with you being an evildoer and it's really stark words aren't they that Jesus uses he says at the last things who are you I don't know who you are I never met you really a terrible thing but still are we to say live in a constant state of fear and paranoia is it true are we to conclude that actually the Lord is not able to save are we to conclude that well of course not that's not what the writer wants us to do at all in fact he wants Christians to have confidence in a better hope verse 11 but he wants that hope to be sure he says it's got to be a sure hope not one that's based on wishful thinking there's a peanuts cartoon isn't there that says hoping to goodness is not theologically sound and it's right it's we should be our hope should be based on what Jesus

Christ has done so let's now move from this rather oh sorry that's the slide says beware of the vaccination effect so let's move on now to look at this better hope so it's natural perhaps to think of those spectacular gifts like prophecy and healings and casting out demons and things like that as the best evidence of a true conversion but the writer is just making the point this ain't the case at all such things can indeed lead to self-delusion an impression of spiritual power but not the true power of true godliness that's not to say though that there is no evidence of salvation what are the things that accompany salvation he says in verse nine and the word accompany is actually rather weak it actually means the things that pertain to or have to do with or associated with we could say perhaps what are the evidence of salvation and the writer lists some doesn't he first of all the work and love expressed as caring for god's people in verse ten paul says if i have not love i'm a just a noisy symbol and but if love is found among us then that is evidence that god is at work if we work for the good of god's people then that is true evidence that god is at work diligence perseverance and indeed the very hope itself in verse 11 and in verse 12 he talks about faith and patience so these are the better evidence of a true spiritual rebirth a true understanding that we are going on with god notice how this echoes Jesus own teaching for example in the beatitudes so let's read those matthew 5 3 to 12 who is it that Jesus said are truly happy are truly blessed blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of god blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted

blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy blessed are the pure in heart for they will see god blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called sons of god blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness for theirs is the kingdom of heaven blessed are you when people insult you persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you those who Jesus says are truly happy are those who are the poor in spirit who hunger and thirst for righteousness that is the true evidence of having been born again by the spirit but before we leave this better hope let me just point out something quite interesting look at verse 10 the appeal here is to god's justice he's saying that god would be unjust to ignore that work that you've already done for his people that's quite a remarkable thing it's not a gospel of justification by works because the writer has already and continues to make it clear throughout his book that salvation is found through continuing faith in Jesus Christ but nevertheless the implication is that god would be unjust in forgetting what they'd already achieved but how can this be so to resolve this paradox the writer appeals to the certainty of god's promise and the fact that god himself is the one who's at work amongst them so let's look thirdly then at a better promise these last verses first of all the writer wants to remind us that the promise of god cannot fail it looked as though he started this chapter by saying well yeah the promise of god can fail because some people start but it doesn't work for them but properly understood the promise of god cannot fail verse 18 why well basically because he said it in fact he says there are two unchangeable things that stand behind his promises

I think we can expand this as saying the first one is his nature expressed in grace in verse 17a his nature is to save and his word is expressed as an oath in verse 17b so both his nature and his word both unchangeable things mean that his promise is safe now of course the thing about an oath is it's only as reliable as the person who gives it and even with the best will in the world an oath giver might be prevented by circumstances on delivering what he'd promised but the point is of course that neither of these restrictions apply to God his nature and his purposes are unchanging and he swears by himself because there's no one else who's greater who's able to overrule or deflect deflect him or even indeed to call him account if he doesn't do it so there is no one greater to overrule

God and so God's promises are always safe always secure and can't fail and notice God's promise starts with grace with favour towards his people verse 14 I will surely bless you and give you many descendants this promise specifically of course was addressed to Abraham but obviously he's using Abraham here as an illustration of the promise that is addressed to all believers and of course he was also reminding them that Abraham had said that the gospel that the blessing will be to all nations not just to the Jews but of course Abraham wasn't entirely passive in this process in fact elsewhere we're told that what does the scripture say Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness that's Romans 4 3 but quoting Genesis 5 verse 6 but actually here the writer puts a slightly different spin on it he emphasises not so much

[28 : 36] Abraham's faith but Abraham's patient waiting now actually if you look at the narrative in Genesis you find that actually it was a bit erratic Abraham Abraham wasn't always that patient and his faith did waver from time to time but in the end his faith held and in the end he received what was promised because the promise of God cannot be revoked and God would be unjust to forget the work that the believer has done because it is God himself who is at work some spectacular spiritual feat or some great theological insight can be ignored by God and he can say depart from me I never knew you but the growth of Christ in those who have true faith cannot be ignored by God and again of course that was what we were looking at this morning but it is

Christ who grows in the believer and for that reason God cannot overlook it it would be unjust if he did and the result is certain for those who are truly enlightened by the Holy Spirit who have truly been born again of the Spirit the hope is certain because it's based in the end well Abraham's hope was based not on his patience but on God's promise but still God still had to do it he had to take the warning and we have to take the warning not to presume on God's promise but rather to trust in it and to walk as though we really do trust in it Abraham was patient and he believed God because the promise couldn't be revoked and the writer's real purpose here is not to scare them quite the reverse his purpose is to encourage them to help them to grow up to maturity he wants to give them great encouragement as he says in verse 18 and he gives us these three pictures to encourage us

and to show that far from being very uncertain as one might have thought from the behaviour of some people who once claimed the word of God but turned aside that in fact the hope is a very certain one and he gives these three pictures first of all of an anchor that in sense a slightly mixed metaphor the anchor is embedded beyond the veil but we can see the point of it the anchor is embedded in the rock that is

Christ it is where the storms can't get at it it is firmly fixed I didn't know this until I read a commentary but apparently like the fish and the cross an anchor was an early Christian symbol apparently based on this idea that the anchor holds within the veil that we are anchored in the word of God and in the promise of God so first of all he says there's an anchor that can't slip and can't cast us under the rocks and we're going to sing about that in a minute it's guaranteed by the promise of God himself but he goes further than that he reminds us that Jesus himself stands there and he describes him in two ways first of all as a surety and secondly as a priest and the word here actually is quite interesting the Greek word prodromos it is it's not the archegos the pioneer that we met in an earlier chapter it's a different word has a similar sort of meaning a forerunner somebody who goes in advance but strong and the commentaries point out that actually the primary meaning of this word in the

Greek is military and it means a scout or even a spy it means someone who an intelligence officer someone who goes in advance of the main army in order to check that it's safe that they're not going to be ambushed or meet a greater force coming the other way and Jesus is the scout if you like the spy who's gone into the territory and checked it out and said yes you can come on it's safe that's the meaning of this quite remarkable and then of course he says he is also a priest one who intercedes for us with the father we won't make more of this because this is what the next few chapters are about we'll be looking at that in much more detail in the next few chapters but God has promised to bless and if we truly put our trust in him then he is able to save us but still we do need to take that warning that we have truly put our trust in him we're not like those who said yes at one point but the cares of the world have turned us aside as Chris again was reminding us this morning but still

God can save let's be confident in that