

A Better Hope

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 13th of April 2003. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled A Better Hope and is based on Hebrews chapter 6 verses 13 to 20.

Let's pray. O God, you are a God who speaks and speaks to us through the testimony of the scriptures about your son Jesus Christ. Give us ears to hear that we may not be hard of hearing and hearts that are soft and receptive to your word that we may not be hard hearted.

So that we may trust your word and obey your commands for Jesus sake and glory. Amen. Well I've given up waiting for it and I'm sure you would have too if you were in my position.

I think 13 years, a bit longer, is long enough to wait. In fact I gave up waiting many years ago. It's not coming and I know that. The ordination present I was promised 13 years ago is yet to arrive.

[1 : 13] I won't say from whom but I no longer hope that it will come. It's a bit like the 18th birthday present I must say as well. Plenty of promises are broken of course.

Promises are broken by fickle family and prevaricating politicians. Promises are broken by repeat offenders. I'll never do it again, your honour. And by children with messy rooms.

I promise to keep it tidy every day. Promises are broken from faithless spouses to ambitious advertisers. This product will give you everything you ever need. Promises are broken day by day.

We're rich in promise but often poor in delivery. And it's easy to give up waiting. That's the same with our response to God often as well. It's easy to give up on God and give up waiting for God to do what we expect.

Or to deliver on His promises. Our prayers may apparently be unanswered. And so we may give up on God. And think it's not going to happen. Where is God?

[2 : 17] He's absent. He doesn't hear my prayers. Sometimes we might even accuse God of failing to live up to expectations. Failing to deliver the goods for us. Sometimes that we doubt that God could even keep His promises.

Because they're so audacious. And so outrageous. I mean look at the world today in which we live. Can we really look at the world and think that God's promise. That Jesus has overcome the world.

Is actually true. Sometimes it's very hard to believe the promises of God. The letter to the Hebrews is written to Christians. Who are drifting from their faith.

And in danger of falling away completely from Christian faith. As we saw in particular last week. And one of the reasons why they're in danger of drifting and falling away. Is because they're vulnerable to giving up on God's promises.

And think that they will not come to fruition. Or to fulfilment. So this letter is written to urge its readers. Christians. To keep on in the Christian faith.

[3 : 18] To keep on with God. And to keep on trusting the promises of God. That one day they will indeed find their fruition. And now in this last bit of chapter 6.

We have a particular focus on the promises that God makes. Now it seems that the original readers of this letter. Probably face the similar sorts of struggles that we do.

They lived in a world where possibly some of them were opposed for being Christians. Either publicly or privately by their family or neighbours. Quite possibly some of them faced economic sanctions for being Christians.

That is in their local village. The businesses would say well if you're a Christian and not worshipping our gods. We're not going to have anything to do with you. And so their businesses may well suffer.

Some of them no doubt face ridicule and mockery and opposition. By friends or family, neighbours, whoever. Or even the local authorities. For being Christian. Where is God?

[4 : 17] Where are God's promises to come to our aid? Where are God's promises that the world will be converted by the gospel of Christ? It's easy to give up waiting. Easy to give up on God. And easy to give up on his promises.

It's easy to drift away thinking God's abandoned us. And he's abandoned his promises to us. But not so, says the writer of this letter. In no way at all.

Take the example of Abraham. Abraham lived 2,000 years before this letter was written. That's 4,000 years before today. And God made to Abraham some promises that we can only regard as audacious and outrageous.

He promised that Abraham would be the father of many descendants. Now that's all very well if Abraham and his wife had already a dozen kids and a few grandkids on the way.

You might well think, well yes, that's quite a feasible promise. But Abraham was 75. His wife was similar age. They had no children and she was barren.

[5 : 22] That's a pretty outrageous promise to make to somebody. Now if you were Abraham you might well think this is a bit of a joke, God. You're making fun of me and my wife here because we haven't got any kids even though we've tried hard.

But it's not a playful jest or even a spiteful jest from God. God's promise to Abraham comes in the first book of the Bible. Book of Genesis chapter 12. It's a solemn promise.

God means what he says. Outrageous though it sounds. It's a promise that some years later God reiterated in Genesis chapter 15. Even with a little ceremony to show that God meant business with Abraham.

Reiterated promise in Genesis 17. And then finally 24 years later the son arrives. Isaac by name. You'd think if you were Abraham and God had promised you an old man and a barren wife that you were going to be the multitude of descendants.

That God would actually hurry up and do something. You'd almost expect that nine months later the baby might be on the way. I mean after all if you waited to 75 you don't want to wait another day. Surely. But not so with God.

[6 : 32] He waited till Abraham was 99 before the child actually came. 24 years imagine. Day by day thinking this outrageous promise of God. That I'm going to be the father of a multitude of descendants.

Here are my 75. 76th birthday. No kids. 77th birthday. No kids. And 24 years before the child is on its way. But even then when the child comes, Isaac, the promise is not secure.

Because God extraordinarily in Genesis chapter 22 when Isaac is just perhaps a teenager or a young boy. God commands him to go up the mountain and sacrifice his son.

His only son. And it would destroy the promise. And yet Abraham obeys the command to the point of picking up the knife. And God says stop.

Here's a ram. Let's sacrifice the ram. Keep the son. And at that point God again confirmed his promise to Abraham. This time with a solemn oath. Swearing that Abraham would be the father of a multitude of descendants.

[7 : 37] Despite all of the circumstances of Abraham's life. Despite no doubt thinking I'm too old for this promise to be fulfilled.

My wife will never have a child. And year by year going on thinking. Did I just dream those words from God? God kept his promise.

And the son came and then grandsons and then another generation. And the readers of this letter are the Hebrews. That is their descendants from Abraham.

They've been converted to Christianity. So they're Jewish Christians. But they themselves are the descendants of Abraham. And 2,000 years after the promise was made to Abraham.

It's very clear surely to the readers that God has kept his promise. That the descendants of Abraham are indeed a multitude of peoples. Scattered through the Middle East and the Mediterranean world as it then was.

[8 : 33] And then known. A promise to Abraham in Genesis 12. A sworn oath to confirm it in Genesis chapter 22. And Abraham had every reason to give up on that promise.

To doubt God's word. To think that God was just fooling around. Or that he dreamt the words. And yet, by and large, Abraham trusted the promise. Waited patiently for its fulfilment.

Through the trials and tests of his life. Trusting that God's word would one day somehow. Come true as it did. The example of Abraham.

And the promise. And the confirmation of the promise. And the oath that was sworn to him. Show God's unchangeable purpose. You see, God is not fickle.

And the promise of the promise. He's not fickle. Easily changing his mind. Making a promise one day in Genesis 12. Changing his mind and reneging on the promise in the next chapter. God's purpose is unchangeable through all those years.

[9 : 38] God's purpose. He's not committed. He's not committed to keep the promise that he made to Abraham. Nor is God weak. It's not as though that God made a promise that he was unable to fulfil.

I mean, I could promise you that this sermon will finish by half past 11. You'll be relieved. And I'll keep my promise. But if I promise you perfect health for the rest of your life.

I'm not sure that you'll believe me. Not perhaps because I'm unreliable. But because it's just beyond my power. You see, God's not weak. And what he promises, he can keep. He's sovereign.

He's in charge. And that's part of the example of Abraham and God's promise to him as well. Nor is God unreliable or uncommitted. He's thoroughly reliable, powerful, able and willing to keep every promise that he makes.

Unlikely as they are. Outrageous as they are. God doesn't drift away from his promise. And he doesn't want his followers to drift away from trusting them.

[10 : 38] Now, the original promise that God made to Abraham was totally sufficient. God's word is to be believed. God said, I will make you the father of many descendants.

Blessing you as I do. That was sufficient. God keeps his word. But because of fragile human faith. God confirmed his promise later on to Abraham.

With a ceremony in chapter 15. And then reiterated it in chapter 22 with a solemn oath. Double assurance. The original promise or covenant.

And then the oath. To make it very clear, not only to Abraham. But to the readers of this letter. And to us. 2,000, 4,000 years later respectively.

That God's purpose is unchanging. And he is absolutely faithful to his word. And if he promises something. We'd better believe it. Because he means business.

[11 : 35] When he promises something to us. Now, when we ever make an oath. Which probably is not all that often. We usually appeal to a higher authority.

To in effect guarantee that what we say is true. I mean, we may well just say. I promise you that such and such will be the case. We may well be believed. And it may come true. But in special occasions.

When we want to show that we really mean business. We might make an oath. Take a court, for example. Where you might have to swear on the Bible. As though we're saying. As God is my witness.

I will keep this promise. So, we're appealing to a higher authority. And we're saying. You may not trust me. But as God is my witness. If God is reliable.

Then believe my word. Because I'm appealing to God here. In an oath. Now, God's got no one higher to appeal to. He's as high as it goes. So, when God makes a promise by himself.

[12 : 33] By his own name. Then he's telling us that he's in charge. There's nowhere higher for us to go. And if God swears by his name. We better believe it.

There's nobody higher. Nobody more reliable. To whom we can appeal. Or go. So, the example of Abraham is meant to encourage us.

It's meant to encourage us. Not because we just follow Abraham's example. But because it reminds us about how absolutely. And utterly. Faithful and reliable. God is.

To the promises and oaths that he makes to us. Not to make us. Give us a multitude of descendants. You may be pleased to know. But rather and primarily.

The promise of heaven. That's God's fundamental promise to us. That one day. Sinners though we may be. We will stand before the presence of God.

[13 : 30] We will stand before the presence of God. Perfected in glory. Sin's done away with. By the death of Jesus on the cross for us. That's the greatest promise.

That God makes to each and every one of us. And that's the promise that the writer to the Hebrews. Is wanting us to trust. That God makes to us. That God makes to us. That God makes to us. That God makes to us. Every day. For the rest of our lives.

See then what the writer has said in these verses. Chapter 6 of Hebrews verse 13. When God made a promise to Abraham. Back in Genesis 12. Because he had no one greater by whom to swear.

He swore by himself saying. And this picks up Genesis 22. I will surely bless you and multiply you. And thus Abraham. Having patiently endured.

Obtained the promise. His son. And beyond that other grandchildren. And descendants. Now human beings of course. Swear by someone greater than themselves.

[14 : 28] And an oath given as confirmation. Puts an end to all dispute. So in the same way. When God desired to show even more clearly. To the heirs of the promise. The unchangeable character of his purpose.

He guaranteed it by an oath. So to Abraham. The promise that he originally made. He guaranteed by an oath. To show that his purpose was unchanging. And the original promise he would surely keep.

So that through two unchangeable things. Verse 18 says. That is the original promise. And the oath. In which it is impossible that God would prove false.

We who have taken refuge. Might be strongly encouraged. To seize the hope set before us. That is as we look back to the story of Abraham. Not only to Abram's faithfulness.

But to God's faithfulness. We might be strongly encouraged. To seize our hope. As Christians. Remember the words of the hymn.

[15 : 26] How firm a foundation. You people of God. Is laid for your faith. In his excellent word. What more can he say. Than to you he has said. To you who to Jesus.

For refuge have fled. God needs say. No other things. His word is secure. And he keeps his promises. And his word.

The scriptures. Are sufficient for us. To trust his word. We who have fled to Jesus. For refuge. That we might strongly be encouraged. To seize the hope set before us.

Too many Christians. These days. It seems to me. Like our society in general. But live for today. Instant gratification.

Instant answers to prayer. Immediate satisfaction. Immediate fulfilment. We pray. We want an answer to prayer. Straight away. Now. If not yesterday. What we want.

[16 : 26] We want now. In this instant society. And for too many Christians. Their Christian faith. Is like a bit of. Value added benefit. To their life. Day by day. It's a sort of thing.

That's incorporated. To sort of give us. A little bit of value today. A little bit of purpose today. To help us. Hour by hour. Day by day. In our life. To give us some meaning. And fulfilment. And for many Christians.

That's. A little more. Christian faith. Is little more than that. A value added benefit. For today. But living as a Christian. Is very keenly.

Future focused. And the hope of heaven. Which. Sadly. In so much. Modern Christian faith. Is faded. Is in fact. The ultimate reality.

The strong hope of heaven. Was there clearly. In Christian eras past. In the Puritan age. Of the 1600s. The 1780.

[17 : 20] 19th centuries. But in the last. 50. 60. 70 years. So often faded. From Christian theology. Christian practice. Christian hymns. And songs.

Heaven. Is what we are to live for. Heaven. Is the ultimate reality. Not this earth. Our world says. This is the reality. This is it. Make the most of it.

Live for today. Who knows what tomorrow will bring. This is it. Seize the day. But Christian faith says. Heaven's the ultimate reality. This earth is passing away.

It's fleeting. It's subject to decay. It's on the way out. Heaven's not just a dream. A pipe dream. Heaven is the reality.

That lasts for eternity. And God says. That the hope of heaven. Is your anchor. What a delightful way. Of describing Christian hope.

[18 : 16] Not something that's. Just wishful thinking. Or dreamy optimism. Heaven is an anchor. That roots our life. Here and now. Day by day. The hope of heaven.

The hope of eternal rest. By contrast. This world. Which looks so secure. Is actually just. Shifting and sinking sand. Fleeting. On the way out.

Passing away. The only true security. In this world. Is the hope of heaven. No person. No institution. No family.

No job. No house. Nothing. Is absolutely secure. In this life. Not our health. Not the church. Only the hope of heaven.

Is absolutely. And ultimately secure. That's our anchor. In daily life. The hope of heaven. Now what a different perception.

- [19 : 13] Of hope. That is. From what we normally think. Our hope that something will happen. It'll just get right in the end. Hope that things will improve. That sort of. Dreamy optimism.
- That characterises so much. Of even Christian life. But for Christian life. Hope is an anchor. So the writer goes on.
- To say in verse 19. We have this hope. A sure. And steadfast. Anchor. Of the soul. And it is an anchor.
- Because it is centred. On Jesus Christ. And his death. And resurrection. And ascension to heaven. We have this hope. A sure. And steadfast. Anchor.
- Of the soul. A hope. That enters. The inner shrine. Behind the curtain. Where Jesus. A forerunner. On our behalf. Has entered. Having become. A high priest.
- [20 : 06] Forever. According to the order. Of Melchizedek. In the ancient. Temple of the Jews. Which may well. Have still been standing. When this letter was written.
- It was destroyed. By the Romans. In 70 AD. 40 years. After Jesus died. And rose. In that temple. There was an inner. Shrine. Or sanctuary.
- A high wall. On three sides. Of the room. The fourth. Guarded by. A very tall. 60 foot. Curtain. That was the most. Holy place.
- Of the old. Jewish temple. And the only person. Who could ever. Enter into that. Most holy place. Was the high priest. And he. Alone.
- Could enter. And only. One day a year. On the day of atonement. Yom Kippur. Once a year. And only then. Could he enter. Carrying the blood.
- [20 : 59] Of the atonement sacrifice. That's all. Otherwise. It was forbidden. Absolutely. For any person. To go beyond. That curtain. Into the inner shrine.
- Regarded as the. Dwelling place of God. In the midst of the temple. The throne room of God. In the original temple. The ark of the covenant. Was there. And God's throne. Was above the ark.
- But as Jesus. Hung dying on the cross. On that first. Good Friday. The curtain. In the Jerusalem temple. Was torn. Torn in two.
- And from top. To bottom. From God's end. Down to earth. Not torn. By Romans. Or Jewish officials. Or some rebels.
- Or bandits. Torn by God. Because at that very moment. Dying on the cross. Was the real atonement sacrifice. Jesus Christ.
- [21 : 57] Our great high priest. Who entered behind the curtain. Not just once. To come out again. To go back in the next year. But in fact. By his death.
- Tore the curtain. So that it was permanent access. For the people of God. To the very throne room of God. God. Symbolic. Not just for the Jerusalem temple. Which is now long gone. But symbolic of our entry to heaven.
- That the curtain of the entrance of heaven. Is torn. By the death of Jesus. And his blood for us. So that you and I may enter. Into the very throne room of heaven.
- To God's very presence. By means of the death of Jesus on the cross. On that first good Friday. That's why our hope is an anchor. Because of Jesus' death and resurrection.
- And ascension to the throne room of God. Where now he sits at God's right hand. As our great high priest. My friends. Heaven is secure. It is a sure and steadfast anchor.
- [22 : 58] For our souls. And it is sure. Steadfast. Definite. Certain. Because of Jesus. And his death for us on the cross. And his rising from the dead.
- And ascending to heaven. As our great high priest. It is so secure. That no accusation. That the devil can ever lay against us. Will deny us entry.

Into God's heaven. No opposition. Or ridicule. Persecution. Or mockery. From friends. Or family. Or whoever. Because we're Christians. Can ever prevent us.

From entering. Heaven's torn curtain door. And no pressures of this life. No illness. Not even death. Can dislodge the anchor. For our soul. The certainty of heaven for us.

No fears. No doubts. Can ever dislodge. Or close. Heaven's doors to us. Nothing. No one.

[23 : 55] Can prevent the realisation. Of this sure and steadfast hope. This anchor. For our souls. This hope is an anchor. Because it all depends.

On Jesus Christ. Our great high priest. God's oath. His covenant. And Jesus' blood. Support me.

In the whelming flood. When all around my soul gives way. He then. Is all my hope. And stay. In every high.

And stormy gale. My anchor holds. My anchor holds. Within the veil. My hope. Is built on nothing less. Than Jesus' blood. And righteousness. No merit of my own.

I claim. But solely trust. In Jesus name. On Christ. The solid rock. I stand. All other ground. Is sinking sand. Does the hope of heaven.

[24 : 54] Keep you motivated. In the Christian life. Each day. It ought to. Does your desire. To arrive. In heavenly glory. Perfected by Jesus' blood. Excite you.

And keep you on. Trusting in God's promise. Today. Tomorrow morning. Tuesday night. Don't drift. Don't give up. The Christian faith. Don't fall away.

Keep trusting. The promises of God. Set your sights. On heaven's throne. And the open door. To heaven. That Jesus has secured. For you. Jesus has gone there.

On our behalf. He's entered heaven's door. And torn the curtain. By his blood. On the cross. So that we have. Permanent access. To the throne. Of God's grace. This earth's passing away.

Don't trust in it. But heaven remains secure. For eternity. Oh yes. There are pressures abound every day. To give up. To drift away.

[25 : 51] To doubt God's promises. As we wait year by year. For answers to prayer. Or fulfilment of promise. Temptations. Always seek to entice us. Off heaven's path.

But imitate Abraham. Waiting patiently. Enduring through trial. And tests. Through the circumstances. That seem to say. God's not serious.

And keep trusting God's promise. Because heaven is a reality. Beyond this world. It is the sure. And steadfast anchor. For our soul.

I visited this week. Two former parishioners. Mildred and Leon Morris. Mildred and Leon. Who are in declining and frail health. Old age. And in nursing home hostile. Mildred was ill in bed.

And I asked her. Mildred. Do you still have your sights. Set on heaven. And I said. I said. I said. I said. I said. Yes. She said. I certainly do. And I reminded her.

[26 : 53] Of these promises. In the letters. To the Hebrews. Of the hope of heaven. Prayed with her. And afterwards. I thought. Oh. Have I been a bit.

Premature. I mean. She may not be dying. She may live for years yet. Or maybe just days. And I realised. That no. I wasn't premature.

Because it doesn't matter. How old somebody is. Or how sick somebody is. You see. Whether we're well. Or sick. Or young. Or old. The question is valid. Are you keeping.

Setting your sights. On heaven. Today. Tomorrow. Every day. Is that your life's destiny? Is the hope of heaven.

Such a secure anchor. For your soul. That it is motivating you. To keep on trusting God. And obeying his commands. Every day. Of your life. Eagerly anticipating. That long awaited arrival.

[27 : 50] In the throne room. Of God's presence. Is the hope of heaven. Keeping you on track. As a Christian. Is the hope of heaven.

And the fulfilment. Of God's promises. On that final day. When the trumpet will sound. And will be ushered. Into God's presence. To stand there. Perfected in glory. Is that what is keeping you going.

As a Christian today. When the last trumpet. When the last trumpet's voice. When the last trumpet's voice. Shall sound. Oh may I then in him be found. Clothed in his righteousness divine.

faultless. Faultless. To stand before the throne. On Christ. The solid rock. I stand. All other ground. All other ground. Is sinking sand.

We have this hope. A sure and steadfast anchor of the soul. A hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain. Where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered.

[28 : 49] Having become a high priest forever. According to the order of Melchizedek.