

Warnings and Promises

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[0 : 01] Gracious Heavenly Father, thank you that you continue to speak to us through your word. And Father, it's not a particularly easy passage tonight, and so we just pray that you would help us to concentrate and to listen, but also to live in light of what you tell us.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, some friends of ours were visiting the Melbourne Museum one day when their four-year-old son ran off on them.

When they found the four-year-old son, he was actually crawled under the ropes of an exhibition. I think it was a dinosaur of some sorts, and he started climbing over the exhibition.

Despite the signs, it says fragile. I don't think he couldn't read, but anyway. Now, the parents told him to get off, and he refused, and as they were trying to get him off the exhibition without crossing the line themselves, they happened to notice a security guard coming towards them from the museum.

And so at that point, they started promising all sorts of things to get their kid down off the exhibit. They promised, we'll buy you the biggest ice cream ever. And that didn't work, and the security guard is getting closer and closer, and at that point, they tried a warning.

[1 : 15] Instead, if you don't get down now, you're not allowed to watch TV for the next 10 years. And with that, the son got down and left the museum, and I don't think they've been back ever since.

And now the point of the story is that we often use promises and warnings to motivate people to do the right thing. Teachers do it. Universities do it. Workplaces do it.

Parents do it. And even preachers do it. So I've got here some chubba chups. I promise you, if you listen to the sermon the whole way through, that you will get a chubba chup at the end.

The warning is, if you don't, if you're not off, you'll miss out. Okay? So warnings and promises are there to help us to do the right thing. And today, the writer actually does that for his readers.

He uses a rather stern warning and some promises to motivate his readers to keep listening to God's word about Christ, the gospel, and to keep trusting in Christ that they might persevere to the end.

[2 : 16] As I showed you last week, they were tempted to give up on Jesus and go back to Judaism. In fact, it seems they'd already started switching off when it came to the gospel of Jesus. That had stopped really listening.

Which brings us to point one in your outlines and verse 11 of chapter five in your Bibles, their problem. Have a look there at verses 11 to 14. He says, Do you see that problem in verse 11?

The writer's saying, look, we have much to say about this. And the this he's referring to is verse 10. How Jesus was a high priest in the order of Melchizedek, that hard name to pronounce.

He says he's got more to say about this, how Jesus is our legitimate high priest in the order of Melchizedek. But he can't go on to say it because it seems that they're not even trying to listen.

So he wants to show them that Jesus really is the great high priest that we need. And so to go from Jesus to the earthly priests again, to go from the gospel back to Judaism, it's like going from the iPhone 7 back to the Nokia City men.

[3 : 59] Look on the slide. It's like going from the iPhone 7 back to this. You just wouldn't do it. It's going backwards. But while he wants to show them how Jesus really is their great high priest in the order of Melchizedek, he needs them to first wake up and listen.

He says in verse 11, it's hard to make this teaching clear, not because it's confusing, but because you're not even trying to understand. Have you ever tried to talk to someone about something who's just not interested in what you're saying?

They don't even try and understand it. It's like me when I try and help my kids with their homework. They just don't want to borrow it. They don't even try and listen. Or maybe you've tried to explain something to one of your parents and they just don't want to listen.

It's hard to explain things to people who just don't want to listen. In fact, the words in verse 11 where it says you no longer try to understand, it's literally you have become sluggish in your hearing.

You see, the real problem for these readers is that they've become slack or lazy listeners. They've become sluggish or reluctant hearers who don't even try to understand when it comes to God's word about Christ.

[5 : 10] That's their problem. And it's stunted their growth. You see verse 12 again? In fact, by this time you ought to be teachers. You need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again.

It's like you need milk, not solid food. It's like you're infants again. He doesn't pull any punches here, does he? He says you guys should be mature Christians by now.

You should be onto solid food. And in fact, you should be teaching others the gospel about Jesus too. But because you've not even tried to understand God's word about Christ, because you're lazy listeners, then it's like your babies again, who need someone to give you your bottle of milk, you know, the basics of Christianity all over.

You see, this lazy listening or sluggish hearing has really stunted their growth as Christians. And there is a warning here for us, I think. You see, I know it's hard to work to listen to sermons and to read God's word.

And I suppose Mark and I could give you a five-second sermon every Sunday, which says, Jesus died for you, so live for him. Amen. That was about five seconds.

[6 : 17] And some of you might even love that. But if that's all we gave you every week without unpacking the implications of all that, then you'd never really grow in your faith.

See verse 14? Solid food is for the mature. And using solid food, verse 14, trains them to distinguish good from evil, to see life as God sees life.

In other words, to grow in godliness. And so that's why each week we spend a significant part of our service listening to God's word being read and then explained. It's why I work hard to unpack the passage as much as I can and as clearly as I can, even stretching you, which you will be stretched tonight, in order to give you solid food so that you might grow.

Of course, I also need to make it as clear and as engaging as possible to help you listen. I don't always succeed at that. In fact, last Sunday at nine o'clock, when I was preaching, a person at nine o'clock fell asleep during my sermon and actually fell off the pew.

It's right about where Eunice is sitting, just there. But while I need to work hard, you need to work hard as well, which means getting off your phones, unless you're using them for your Bibles, or looking up the Greek or the Hebrew.

[7:41] And if you get distracted like a cute kid, like Jemima, I got distracted for the first, second song, I was playing, waving with Jemima down the back. Discipline is bring back, bring yourself back. Look at God's word.

Get some solid food so you'll grow. And that's exactly what the writer wants to do. See chapter six, verse one. He says, You see, the writer is determined to leave these elementary or basic truths about the gospel and get onto some solid teaching about Jesus being priest in the order of Melchizedek, which is next week, chapter seven.

Now, when he says he wants to move beyond the basics of the gospel, he doesn't mean onto something better than the gospel or different to the gospel.

Rather, he just means unpacking the basics of the gospel. As I've said before, we never graduate from the gospel onto something else. Rather, we grow deeper in the gospel, in understanding it and its implications for our lives.

And so that's what the writer wants to do here. And God willing, he says he will do it. Because we need God to help us, don't we? That's why we pray before our Bible readings and before the sermons, because God is the one that helps us to understand his word and more than that, to accept it.

[9:11] But as I said, at the same time, the readers must also work to listen and grow in his word. For the writer knows that if they continue to ignore God's word in Christ, then they'll not only stay as infants, but they'll actually drift away from Christ.

Do you remember chapter two, verse one? It's on the next slide. A couple of weeks ago, he said, Therefore, we must pay the most careful attention to what we have heard. You know, really listen.

Why? So that we do not drift away. You see, to ignore God's word means that you'll not only stay as infants, but eventually you'll start to drift away from God's word and away from Christ.

And so to help them realize how serious this is, the writer gives them a severe warning. So point to chapter six, verse four. He says, It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age and who have fallen away to be brought back to repentance.

To their loss, they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. You hear the warning? It says, If you fall away from God, if you are so sluggish that you stop listening to God altogether and reject Christ, then it is impossible to be brought back to repentance, he says.

[10:42] That's how high the stakes are. Now, this is not talking about sinning from time to time, which we all do, or backsliding, as people call it. It's talking about a person who's become a Christian and then deliberately and persistently chooses to turn away from Christ.

If you look in your Bible, it's back at chapter three, verse 12. It's just on the left-hand side of your page there. Chapter three, verse 12, left-hand side of the page. He puts it like this.

See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. That's what he's talking about.

He's talking about a Christian who develops a sinful and unbelieving heart that turns away from God for good. And the writer says it is impossible for this sort of person to be brought back to repentance.

In other words, he's saying if a Christian falls away, then they can't come back. Now, immediately we want to say, well, hang on a second, what about all the promises of God? Like John 10, where it says, no one can snatch you from my hand.

[11:49] And we'll come to that in a moment. But first, we need to hear this warning. And in case we don't quite hear it, the writer illustrates it for us in verse seven, chapter six, verse seven.

Land that drinks in the rain, often falling on it, and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed, receives the blessing of God.

But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end, it will be burned.

Here there are two types of land, which represents two types of people. Both receive the rain, God's word, if you like, but only one type of land produces crops that are useful.

That is, only one type of person responds appropriately to God's word. And this good land, we're told, receives the blessing of God, heaven, if you like.

[12:47] But the land that does not respond appropriately, that produces thorns and thistles, will be burned, it says, which is a common metaphor in the Bible for hell. At the start of the sermon, I told you about our friend's son who was climbing on the exhibit and was threatened with 10 years of no TV and for him that would be hell.

But the warning here is if we've begun the Christian life and then choose to stop and persistently reject Christ, then it really will be hell for us.

You see, we all have choices in life and we could choose to ignore Jesus, we could choose to walk out of this church today, away from Jesus and never come back. We could choose that. We wouldn't, but we could.

Of course, the purpose of this warning is so that they don't drift away from Christ. I mean, that's why warnings are given. Warnings are designed to prevent something bad from happening.

So take the warning sign on the next slide. So it says, beware the dog. The cat is not trustworthy either. I don't know what image comes to mind, but untrustworthy cat.

[13:58] It's like the kind of image that came to my mind. But the point is, this warning sign is there so you don't enter the backyard and get attacked by the dog or sniped by the untrustworthy cat.

Warnings are there to prevent bad things from happening, you see. So too here. The writer gives this real warning to his readers so that they won't fall away.

And at the same time, in the rest of the Bible, God uses warnings to keep us from falling away. It's the same in the rest of the Bible. The warnings are given to keep us listening to God's word, to keep us persevering to heaven.

But the other thing he does is not just give warnings, he also gives promises to help us as well. So point three on your outline, verse nine in your Bibles. He says, Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case.

Things that have to do with salvation. God is not unjust. He will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them, he says.

[15:09] Here the writer encourages his readers with the promise of God's faithfulness. He says he is convinced that they will not fall away, but will enjoy full salvation in heaven.

Why? Well, verse 10 gives us the reason. Verse 10 actually starts with the word for or because. It's a bit frustrating that the NIV has left it out, but he says he is convinced of their salvation because, verse 10, God is not unjust and so will not forget their work and love for him.

seen by the way they help his people. In other words, their actions of serving others are evidence that they love God, but it's also evidence that God has been at work in their lives, enabling them to love him and serve others.

What's more, the writer knows that God is not unjust. He knows God will not start working in a person's life only to abandon them. We all kind of start projects and then abandon them from time to time.

I had a little project to beat my son at one of his PS4 games. He kept whipping my butt, so I just gave up. But God is not like that. He finishes what he starts.

[16:28] And so when the writer sees their actions, he knows God is at work and he also knows that God does not forget his people. So he's convinced that God will bring them to heaven, to salvation, he says.

That's a bit like what Jesus said on John 10. So the next slide is some great promises in scripture as well. John 10 says, I give them eternal life, says Jesus, and they shall never perish.

No one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me is greater than all. No one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. Or like Paul from Philippians, which is a bit similar to this in Hebrews.

Paul says, I am confident of this, convinced of this, that God who began a good work in you, like these Hebrews, will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

You see, their salvation is certain because of the promise of God's faithfulness. God has started working in them and their actions are evidence of that.

[17:38] And so God will continue his work in them until he brings them home to heaven. Because once God starts something, he finishes it. He is not unjust, nor does he forget and let go.

Instead, he is faithful and will bring his work in them to completion. And just like the warning is meant to encourage them to listen to God's word in Christ and persevere with Jesus instead of going back to Judaism, so too is the purpose of this promise.

Do you see verse 11 and 12? He says, we want each of you to show the same diligence to the very end so that what you hope for, salvation, may be fully realized.

That is salvation in heaven. We do not want you to become lazy or sluggish, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit heaven.

That is what is being promised. Here the word lazy is the same word as before about not trying to understand. And so the promise of God's faithfulness is again meant to do the same thing as the warning.

[18:49] It's meant to encourage them not to be lazy listeners, but to be faithful perseverers. those who will inherit the promise of heaven. And so on one side of the coin we have this warning about Christians falling away, that if we choose to ignore God's word about Christ and deliberately and persistently turn away from Christ, then there's no hope of heaven for us.

But on the other side of the coin we have this promise that Christians won't fall away because God is not unjust or unfaithful. He will not forget or abandon his people.

Both sides of the coin are true. In fact, both must be true if they are to be effective in keeping us persevering.

Now, I realise it seems contradictory, doesn't it? To say that God won't let us fall away on this hand, but that we can fall away on the other, it just seems contradictory to us. But there are a few things that we just can't make sense of in our heads.

There's lots in the Bible that we can make sense of, but there are some things that we can't. Like, how is Jesus both fully God and fully man at the same time?

[20:02] How does that work? Or, like, how can we fall away on the one hand, but can't fall away on the other? How does that work? And so we have a choice when it comes to this rather solid food or teaching tonight.

we can either choose to ignore it and not listen or we can choose to accept it. We can either say, that doesn't make sense to me, so I'm ignoring God's word, as though God's word ought to submit to our logic, as though we are God.

Or we can say, look, that doesn't quite make sense to me, but it does to God, so I'll trust him. I'll heed his warnings and I'll be encouraged by his promises.

That's the choice we have, to listen and accept or to ignore and reject. But the purpose of these warnings and promises is to encourage us to persevere, to keep listening and to make it to heaven.

And in case we need more help, the writer adds that the promise of heaven itself is certain. So point four, verse 13. He says, when God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, saying, I will surely bless you and give you many descendants.

[21:23] And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised. Here the writer says, look at Abraham, he persevered and he received what was promised.

What's more, the promise was certain because it came with an oath, and an oath guarantees that. You see verse 16? People swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument.

Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs, which is us, of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath.

You see, in ancient times, people would swear an oath by someone or something greater than themselves, whether it was the temple or God. And the oath ended all argument or doubt over whether what was promised would be kept.

The oath was like putting the promise in writing. I promised my children the other day that they could have subway for dinner, and one of them actually wanted me to put it in writing and sign it.

[22:30] Cheeky little rotter. But you see, even they knew that if you put something in writing and sign it, then it's even more certain. And that's what an oath did. God swore an oath by himself, since there was no one greater to swear by, and by swearing an oath, God put his promise in writing and signed it, made it even more certain.

But notice verse 17, the promise to Abraham was also to his heirs, that is, his spiritual descendants, who will inherit these promises.

That's us. God's promise included a heavenly land for us, and so we have two things which guarantee heaven. We have God's word and we have God's oath, and both are meant to encourage us to keep listening to God's word and persevere.

Do you see verse 18? God did this, put his word and swore an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, his word and oath, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us, may be what?

Greatly encouraged, he says. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure, and it enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, he says.

[23:55] See, God's word and oath make our hope of heaven certain, and so this promised hope of heaven then becomes like an anchor for our soul. You know, anchors with ships, an anchor of a ship holds the ship steady and keeps it from drifting away.

So our hope of heaven is like an anchor which holds us steady and keeps us from drifting away, because we know heaven is certain. Some of the Coptic Christians who had their churches bombed last Palm Sunday were interviewed, and as well as the bus more recently, but the Coptic Christians who were in the churches on Palm Sunday were interviewed by a Christian magazine and asked what made them keep going, and they had a couple of reasons.

One of their reasons was this, knowing those who are martyred are in a better place and that one day we will join them. The hope of heaven, you see, helped them persevere.

And this hope of heaven is not only secured by God's word and oath, it also is secured by Christ himself. Do you see the rest of verse 19 and 20? Our hope enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where God's presence was, where our forerunner Jesus has entered on our behalf.

He has become the high priest forever in the order of Melchizedek. The writer says, our hope has entered the inner sanctuary, which is where God dwelt in the temple, behind the curtain.

[25 : 29] I notice that's also where Jesus is. In other words, our hope is where Christ is. Our hope is secured in Christ, is what he's saying.

How? Well, first because Jesus is our forerunner, who's run ahead of us and opened the way to heaven. And second, because Jesus is our high priest, who, as we heard last week, enables us to come before the throne of grace and receive help to keep going to heaven.

You see, our hope of heaven is even more secure. Not only did God promise it and then swear it, but Jesus has secured it. Our hope is secure in Christ.

He has opened the way to heaven for us and he stands as our high priest to intercede and pray for us, as we'll hear next week, to ensure that we'll make it home to heaven.

Now, I realise listening is hard work and we've tackled a rather complex issue tonight. Listening to God's word about Christ is hard work. In fact, I was at my old church this time and I was preaching in an elderly lady also nodded off to sleep.

[26 : 44] It's only twice. It's only happened to me twice. This was the first time. Last week was the second time. The only problem was that this lady, my whole church, was also the organist. So when she fell asleep, she fell onto the keys and she woke everyone up.

Well, not everyone, she was the only one asleep. Point is, I understand it. Listening is not always easy. It is hard. especially listening to God's word in Christ, especially when it's hard to understand or to put into practice.

We need to, though, if we are to grow and persevere as Christians. Otherwise, we'll stay infants and worse, drift away.

so if you are here tonight and you've become sluggish when it comes to God's word, and perhaps you're drifting from Christ back to the world, then please hear this very real warning and don't fall away.

Instead, persevere until you inherit heaven. And if you are here tonight as someone who is anxious about falling away or really trying to follow Christ but finding it hard, then hear the very real promise, on the other hand, that God will not forget you and not ever give up on you.

[28 : 09] Instead, he will help you and keep working in you. And more than that, we have Christ as our high priest who will intercede for you to bring you forgiveness and help in our time of need.

So persevere until you too, inherit heaven. Let's pray. Gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you for this part of your word which so many Christians have struggled with over the years.

We thank you though that it teaches us to persevere, that you have given real warnings but also very real and great promises. And so Father, we pray that you would help us to heed your warnings and cling to your promises, that we may persevere with Christ to the very end.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.