

Warnings and Promises

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[0 : 00] Why don't I pray for us before we look at God's word together. Again, Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word.

We thank you that you continue to both warn and encourage us from it. And so, Father, please give us ears to hear, minds to understand and accept, and hearts that would seek to live in light of your word.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, if you were ever looking after some relatives of yours, some children, whether it be your own, your grandchildren, nieces, nephews, whatever it is, I wonder how you would encourage them to do the right thing.

Obviously, you would ask them. But if they didn't listen to you, what would you then do? We have some friends of ours who were visiting Melbourne Museum one day when their youngest, their four-year-old son, ran off.

They chased after him. But by the time they found him, he had crawled under some rope and was climbing on one of the exhibitions. Now, it was an old and fragile exhibition.

[1 : 11] And so our friends were rather shocked and worried. And they pleaded with him to get off. And he would not listen. Now, to make matters worse, a security guard had noticed something of a commotion in their direction.

He was on the other side of the building. And so he was walking across towards them. And our friends grew more and more frantic. And so they said to their son, if you get down, I promise I will buy you the biggest ice cream ever.

Now, that didn't work all that well. And so they added the warning. And if you don't get down here, you're banned from watching TV for 10 years. And at that point, he came down. But here's the thing.

We often use promises and warnings to encourage people to keep doing the right thing, don't we? Whether it's parents or grandparents or teachers or even in the workplace, there are warnings and promises to encourage people to keep doing the right thing.

And this is what the writer is doing in our passage for us this morning. He uses rather severe warning, a warning that worries many Christians and a great promise.

[2 : 22] In fact, two promises to motivate his readers to keep trusting in Jesus. These Hebrews who had turned from Judaism to Jesus, remember, were tempted to turn away from Jesus and go back to Judaism.

And so he uses these warnings and promises that they might keep trusting in Jesus, keep listening to the gospel word about his son. For these readers, you see, had a problem.

They were not listening to the word about Jesus. Point one, verse 11 of chapter five. It'd be great if you had your Bibles open there. Page 1207. Have a look there.

Chapter five, verse 11. Page 1207. He says, We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand.

In fact, though you by this time you ought to have been teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food.

[3 : 28] Anyone who lives on milk being still an infant is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness, but solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil, to be mature, if you like.

Now, do you see the problem of the readers here? By this time, he says, they should have listened to God's word so much so that they should have grown as Christians. It becomes so mature that they're able to teach one another.

But instead, they are still children who need milk, who need to be taught the basics all over again. But the cause of their immaturity is that they have become sluggish hearers of God's word. And look at verse 11 for a moment. He says, He has more to say about this. The this refers back to the verse before in verse 10, about Jesus being our high priest in the order of Melchizedek. But he cannot teach them, not because it's necessarily difficult, but because, verse 11, they no longer try to understand. Do you see that? It literally, it says, because you have become sluggish in your hearing.

[4 : 42] You see, the real problem for these readers is that they have become slack or lazy listeners. They become sluggish or reluctant hearers when it comes to God's word.

And so they no longer try to understand. I used to be a school teacher, a primary school teacher, and I remember teaching one student long division, which is not dead easy, but it's not particularly hard.

It's not calculus or algebra or anything like that. But this student just wasn't interested. They weren't even trying to listen or to understand. They were a sluggish hearer, you see.

And so because of that, it was impossible to teach them, no matter how clear I made it. And so they did not grow in their mathematical ability. Well, so too for their readers, these readers in their spiritual lives.

They'd become sluggish hearers, didn't try to understand, and so they weren't growing. They were still infants. And there is a warning here for us, I suspect. You see, I know it is hard work to listen.

[5 : 44] And I suppose I could give you a five-minute devotion each Sunday, which said, Jesus died for you, so live for him. Amen. That's it. Now, I suspect some of you wouldn't mind that, actually.

But if I gave you just that, and that's all I gave you every week, without unpacking it, then you'd never grow in your faith. You'd never be trained to distinguish, as verse 14 puts it, good from evil, as God sees it.

It would be like giving a child warm milk for the rest of their lives, with no vegetables, or fruit, or solid food. It wouldn't help them grow very well, you see.

So that's why each week, we spend a significant part of the service listening to God's word, having it read and explained. It's why I work hard to unpack the passage as much as I can, as clearly as I can, even stretching you, which you will be stretched this morning, so that you'll have solid food, so that you'll grow.

Now, while I need to make it as clear and as engaging as possible, the warning for you is that you're not to be a sluggish hearer. We're to work hard at listening, in other words.

[6 : 58] And can I say, I do think you listen well. I've only seen a couple of people not off in the last four years I've been here. And perhaps that was my fault. No, no, I'm joking.

Although I did have one person at an old church who was quite elderly, and she did nod off during my sermon. And the only problem was that she was the organist, so she fell. Woke herself up and everyone else.

Bruce, you're awake? Yep, good. So we do have to work hard at listening. It is hard, but we have to work hard at it, so that we might have solid food, so that we might grow as Christians.

And that's what the writer wants to do for his readers. He wants to give them some solid food. So chapter 6, verse 1, he says, Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death and of faith in God, instruction about cleansing rites, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead and internal judgment.

And God permitting, we will do so. You see, the writer is determined to leave these elementary or basic truths and to give them some solid food.

[8 : 11] Presumably the teaching about Jesus being a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek, things like that. Now these basic truths he mentions here at the beginning of chapter 6, things like about becoming a Christian, so he has repentance and faith.

They are things about signs of being a Christian or symbols of being a Christian, like washings or the word can be baptisms and laying on of hands and things about the future, so the resurrection of the dead on the last day and internal judgment.

He says that he wants to move beyond that, but he doesn't mean leave it behind. Now when he says move beyond, he means build on it with deeper and more solid teaching.

As I've said a number of times, we never graduate from the gospel onto something else, as though there is something else better than the gospel. No, no, rather we grow deeper in our understanding of the gospel and living it out.

And that's what the writer wants to do here, to unpack the gospel more and to feed them solid food about Jesus. And then he adds though, in verse 3, they will do so God permitting.

[9 : 16] You see, the readers will not be able to listen without God's help. That's why we pray before we have the Bible read or I speak. God must work in us to enable us and help us listen and accept the word.

Well, we need God's help. But at the same time, we also must work ourselves to listen and accept the word. Both are true. And so to help them wake up and listen, he gives them a very severe warning at point 3, verse 4.

Point 2, I think, verse 4. He says, Now, I know these verses cause some Christians much trouble, but it is clear, is it not, that if you fall away from God, if you are so sluggish that you stop listening to God's word altogether, that if you reject Christ, turn away from him, the warning is, it is impossible for you to be brought back to repentance.

Now, this is not talking about sinning from time to time. We all do that. It is not talking about backsliding. No, it is talking about a person who has become a Christian and then deliberately and persistently turns away from Jesus.

Chapter 3, verse 12 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.

[10 : 58] And the writer is saying, it is impossible for this sort of person to be brought back to repentance. It is a severe warning, isn't it? Now, immediately, we want to say, well, what about the promises of God which say that he will carry us to heaven, which say that no one can pluck us from his hand?

And we'll come to that in a moment. But first, we need to hear this warning. And in case we haven't quite heard it, the writer illustrates it for us in verses 7 and 8. He says, verse 7, 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. I hear there are two types of land which represents two types of people. Both receive the rain, which represents God's word, but only one type of land responds appropriately. Only one type of land produces crops that are useful, appropriate, for those who farmed it.

That is, only one type of person responds appropriately to God's word. And this good land, we're told, receives or shares in the blessing of God, which as we'll see, refers to heaven.

[12 : 16] While the land that does not respond appropriately, the land that produces thorns and thistles instead, well, we're told it will be burned, which is a common metaphor in the Bible for hell.

You see, we all have choices in life. We could choose to ignore Jesus. We could choose to walk out of this building this morning and walk away from Christ never to come back. We could choose that, couldn't we?

We wouldn't, but we could. You see, we need to understand that there's a very real possibility that we could fall away from God, that we could choose to reject Jesus, and this warning is real.

But we also need to understand that God uses this warning to ensure that we won't walk away from Jesus, that we won't fall away. see, God works by his spirit so that we will heed these warnings and keep trusting in Jesus.

God has always worked in his word. We saw it from Joshua's reading with warnings and promises working together to keep us moving forward, to keep us trusting in Jesus.

[13 : 28] I mean, that's what warnings do, don't they? They keep us from doing the wrong thing. So here's a rather over-the-top warning on the slide there. You know, trust with violators will be shot, survivors will be shot again, a bit over-the-top.

But the warning is there to stop you from being shot, right? That's the purpose of the warning. And here in Hebrews and elsewhere in the Bible, I might add, warnings are designed to keep us from falling and instead keep us persevering to heaven.

Warnings and promises work together. And so let's have a look at God's promise as well. Point three, verse nine. It 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.

You see, the writer is confident that his readers will not fall away, that they will be brought into full salvation in heaven. But why is he so convinced of this?

Well, verse 10. Verse 10 starts with the word because. Literally, it says, because God is not unjust. He will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped the people and continue to help them.

[14:47] Here we have the promise that God is not unjust, so unjust that he'll forget who his people are. He will not forget who are his people. You see, by their love for God and their service of Christians, these readers have shown signs of being God's people.

They've shown signs that God has started to work in them and God is not going to abandon those he started to work in. It is similar to the promise on the next slide from Philippians chapter 1 where Paul says, I am confident of this, that God who began a good work in you will carry it to completion until the day of Christ.

Do you see that promise? God is not going to forget his people. He's going to carry them, continue working in them until heaven, until the day of Christ. And it's a great promise.

And like the warning, this promise is designed to encourage us, to keep us going in the Christian life, to keep us showing the same kind of diligence we had when we first became Christians so that we won't become sluggish to God's word, but rather imitate those who have faithful endurance.

Do you see verse 11? He says, for we want each of you to show the same diligence to the very end. The same diligence they had at the start to the very end so that what you hope for may be fully realized.

[16:13] We do not want you to become lazy or literally sluggish, the same word as verse 11, but to imitate those who faith and could be endurance inherit what has been promised.

You see, the promise here is that God will not forget, and that promise is meant to do the same thing as the warning, it's meant to encourage us to keep going on, to not be sluggish, but have faithful endurance so that we might inherit the promise of heaven.

And so we have here a warning and a promise side by side. The warning is there is a possibility of falling away. The promise is that you won't fall away, for God uses the warning and the promise to keep us moving forward.

Now, if you think about it for too long, your head spins and you go around in circles. And at one point, we just have to let God be God. If you think about it too much, it doesn't make sense to us, but this is how God has always worked.

He's using both very real warnings and very real promises to keep us persevering to the very end. And so that's what we need to do. We need to hear the warning and cling to the promise so that we might keep persevering.

[17:31] You see, if there is a Christian who seems to be sluggish when it comes to God's word, like these readers were, they need to hear this warning. They need to hear that there is a very real possibility of falling away so that they might wake up and start listening to God's word, start imitating those who showed faithful endurance, who inherited heaven.

But I know for most of you, you do listen to God's word. You do imitate faithful endurance. Indeed, I'm often encouraged by how many of you are persevering in the faith despite the very real struggles you are going through.

And so for you, you need to hear God's promise that he will not forget you, nor forsake you, so that you might be encouraged to keep trusting in the Lord Jesus.

What's more for us who do persevere in faith, then there's another promise, the promise of heaven, which is certain, brings us to our final point, point four and verse 13.

It 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.

[18:43] And so after waiting patiently, the word could be after enduring patiently, Abraham received what was promised. Here the writer says, look at Abraham.

Here is someone you can imitate. Here is someone who had faithful endurance. And look what happened. God kept his promise to Abraham, didn't he? Abraham received what God had promised him.

And so the writer's point is that if we keep persevering, then God will give to us what he has promised, the blessing of heaven. And this promise of heaven is certain because it came with an

oath.

Do you see verse 16 and 17? It says, people swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms, guarantees, if you like, what is said, and puts an end to all argument.

Now, because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of Abraham, that's us, of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath.

[19 : 48] You see, in ancient times, an oath ended all argument and all doubt. An oath guaranteed the promise so there was no more need for discussion or dispute. For us, it's like a contract, a written contract.

If you go and buy a car from a used car salesman, they might give you his word that it's the best car on the lot, okay? You know, it's guaranteed for 12 months or whatever, but you're not so sure.

And so he puts it in writing, you know, guaranteed for whatever months or years. And putting it in writing, putting that contract down, guarantees his word, you see.

It's like that with an oath. An oath was like putting it in writing. And the author says, God has not only given his word, his promise, he's also put it in writing with an oath so that we can be absolutely certain that the promise to bless us and Abraham's descendants and give us a share of the heavenly inheritance is true if we persevere.

You see, someone might say to us, how do you know heaven exists? I mean, you could be going to church Sunday after Sunday, you could be trusting in Jesus, but how do you know it's actually going to be there for you at the end?

[21 : 03] It could be, you know, one cosmic practical joke. But the writer is saying here that our hope of heaven is certain because God not only gave his word, but he also gave an oath.

And what's more, it is anchored in Christ. And so it is meant to encourage us to keep going. Do you see verse 18? God did this so that by two unchangeable things that is his word and oath in which it is impossible for God to lie anyway.

We who have fled to take hold of this hope of heaven set before us may be greatly encouraged. We know it's certain. And so we have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.

It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain where our forerunner Jesus has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest for us forever in the order of Melchizedek.

You see, because our hope of heaven is so certain, he becomes like an anchor for us, for our souls to encourage us, to hold us steady in the Christian lives, the way an anchor holds the ship steady, to keep us from drifting away from Jesus.

[22 : 19] Because we know it's certain. We know it's not a joke. For God will keep his promise. And what's more, our hope is anchored in Christ himself, who is already in heaven.

He died, rose, and he's already in heaven there. He's already secured a place for us. He's already been our forerunner, gone ahead of us, opened up the way. It's like, this is a really bad illustration, it's the best I could think of, but it's like he's gone to this amazing restaurant, and he's already inside, and he's already booked a table for us, in his father's house, for us who patiently persevere. Heaven's certain. God has promised it, put it in writing, and Jesus is there, securing our place, so to speak.

And so we are to persevere until we enter heaven. That's what we are to do. We are to keep listening to his voice. We are not to be sluggish hearers or slack listeners. We are to work at listening to God's word so that we might grow in maturity.

We are to heed his very real promises, sorry, very real warnings, and cling to his very great promises. We are to do both, that we might keep trusting in the Lord Jesus to the very end.

[23 : 39] For it is in him alone that our hope is found and anchored. So let's pray that we might do that. Let's pray. Let's pray.