

STUDIES IN HEBREWS No. 12

Hebrews 6:13-20

August 18, 2002

In the section of this sermon we considered last Lord's Day evening, the author gave warning of the dire consequences of turning away from God and, once more, exhorted his hearers to press on to the end in the faith of Jesus Christ.

Now, he is going to commend to them that persevering faith with an illustration. Like any good sermon, this preacher mixes together biblical exposition, illustration, and application. Characteristically, he anticipates in these next verses, an argument he is going to elaborate later on. The example of the faithful men and women who have gone on before us and whose sturdy faithfulness to Christ should be a lesson for us will, of course, be enlarged in the famous "Hall of the Heroes of Faith" in chapter 11. He said in v. 12 that he wanted them "to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised." Well, now, he sets before them the example of such a person for their imitation.

v.14 Abraham, to whom all Jews look as their father. In 2:16 these Jewish Christians were already described as "Abraham's descendants."

v.15 The point is simply that one must wait for the promise of God to be fulfilled, but that, however long one must wait, one will never be disappointed who counts on God to keep his promises. That is what Abraham did and he received what was promised. In this case he received the son who had been promised to him, Isaac, a son and an heir through whom God's promise to make a great people out of Abraham could be realized. However, the promise was not fully fulfilled with the birth of Isaac. What follows is from Gen. 22 and that incident came after both the birth of Isaac and the trial of Abraham's faith when God ordered him to sacrifice his son. What I mean is that when we read "Abraham received what was promised," we are probably not to think simply of Sarah bearing him a son, but, once again, of what Abraham inherits in the world to come. That is the way the phrase is used elsewhere in Hebrews. The focus is always on the inheritance of the saints in heaven, not what they obtain here in this world. And, what is more, it is the way the idea is used here in the preacher's exhortation in v. 12. He is most assuredly *not* telling them that if they hold fast to Christ they will get something here in this world for their pains. He is telling them that if they hold fast to Christ they will inherit in the world to come. That is why, in v. 11, he urges them to press on *to the end*. It is only at the end that one obtains *this* promise. Later he is going to be explicit and emphatic on this point: they do not inherit *until* the world to come and there only if they have held fast to the end in loyalty to Christ. And of course, that is the promise that the author draws special attention to in v. 14. The birth of Isaac and the receiving of him back from the dead, as it were, were both pledges of the promise that he would be a father of a great nation, *a promise Abraham did not see realized in this world*.

v.17 "heirs" is a reference to all the believing people of God, OT and NT, as the context makes clear. So, what happened back there in Genesis 22 was for "us" as well as for earlier generations of God's people.

- v.18 The reference to the oath is a reference to Gen. 22:16 where God tells Abraham, after he showed himself willing to sacrifice Isaac, “I swear by myself, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky...”
- v.19 In other words, we are fixed to an immovable object and that immovable object is the throne of God itself. [Bruce, 131]
- v.20 The reference to the “inner sanctuary” – the innermost chamber of the tabernacle and temple, that is, the most holy place – anticipates the argument of 9:6-14 and the distinction the author there makes between the ineffectual sacrifices of the Levitical system and the power of Christ’s sacrifice to save to the uttermost. Christ entered that most holy place, as we will read in 8:2, not in the temple that is a copy, the earthly temple, but in the heavenly one, the true sanctuary. There the offering was made for our sins – in the sense that the sacrifice Christ made was offered to God, as it were laid directly at the feet of the Living God himself – and there our perfect high priest still offers intercession for us.

Once again, you get the futuristic note. Jesus went *before us* into the sanctuary. We will follow him in due time.

This section anticipates several other sections that are soon to come besides chapter 11 and its record of the exemplars of faith. The end of v. 20 anticipates the development of the fact that Christ is a priest after the order of Melchizedek that immediately follows in chapter 7. And, the notion of the oath that confirms the promise and of Christ entering the heavenly sanctuary before us anticipates the presentation of Christ as the “guarantee” of the new covenant that we find in 7:22ff. That idea is prominent and important in Hebrews.

The verb translated “confirmed” in 6:17 is the verb often translated “to mediate” and its noun form is the word “mediator” that occurs in Hebrews and several other places in the NT. For example, in 8:6, the NIV’s translation reads that [Jesus] is the *mediator* of a better covenant. However, in Hebrews, as the scholarship generally recognizes, this word group has the meaning of “confirm” or “guarantee.” One proof of that is the statement in 7:22 where, in a similar context, Jesus is called “the guarantee” of the better covenant and there the word used is a different word that means specifically “guarantee” or “guarantor.” 8:6 looks back to 7:22 and it is generally accepted that in the usage of this author “mediator” and “guarantor” are synonyms. As one scholar sums up the import of this language, “With his life, death and ascension Jesus has given us the assurance...that the beginning of the saving work of God will necessarily be followed up by its completion.” [Preisker, *TDNT*, ii, 329] Jesus, by his saving work, has guaranteed to us that if we hold fast to him we shall surely be with him forever in heaven.

Now there are some important consequences that flow from this way of speaking about Jesus.

1. Obviously speaking of Jesus as the “guarantor” of the new covenant cannot be easily squared with the all-too-common idea that the new covenant is now with us already, that we live in

the new covenant in distinction from the OT saints who lived in the old covenant. According to this author, the new covenant has been promised, it has not been fulfilled. You don't need a guarantee or guarantor for something you already have. This is one of many ways in which the actual argument of Hebrews – in distinction from assumptions people make about its argument – demonstrates that the great distinction this author is interested in making is not between the pre-Christian and Christian epochs, between the Mosaic administration and that introduced by Christ and his apostles, or some unmentioned superiority of our present spiritual situation to that which prevailed in the days before the incarnation, but is rather the distinction between this world and the next and the respective fates in that next world of those who do not truly believe in Christ and those who hold firmly to him to the end of their lives. This preacher's perspective is future-driven. He is not concerned in this sermon with what one gets from Christ in this world but rather with what one inherits in the next if he or she is and remains a faithful follower of Christ.

2. Second, there is the very practical acknowledgement that the Christian life must be lived by means of trusting in what one cannot see. That point, of course, is going to be made more explicit later when the example of Abraham is expanded into an entire chapter of examples of those who, by faith, obtained what was promised. Indeed, that chapter 11, you remember, begins with the summary statement: "Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."

Now, there are many ways to apply this truth about the nature of faith as the evidence of things not seen, but I want to apply it, this evening, to the sacraments. I look for opportunities to talk about the Lord's Supper because, of course, and very happily it has become a larger part of our life over the past number of years. That is right. But, every now and then we have to step back to consider what we do every Sunday lest we lose an active sense of what we are doing and what blessings there are to be sought in what we do. And this is all the more true regarding the sacraments because there are many ways in which American evangelicalism has created a spiritual culture in which the sacraments do not find a natural place. It is very interesting that in the new seeker-friendly churches, the mega-churches built in the recent past, sacramental worship has almost no place. It can be omitted with no sense of appreciable loss. But surely that is not right. God gave us these sacraments. He made them important. But it must be clear to us what that importance is or we will not fully appreciate the benefit there is for us in baptism and the Lord's Supper. Hence the need to speak of them from time to time.

In fact, though neither baptism nor the Lord's Supper is mentioned here in Hebrews 6, I often turn people to this passage to explain to them what sacraments are and how they work. I don't mean to suggest, of course, that this is a complete explanation. The sacraments, being signs and seals of the covenant of grace, work in all the ways God's grace works in and for us. But, one very important way of their working, has to do with this principle of vouching for or confirming, which God did in another way by swearing an oath to Abraham. In other words, the oath God swore had the same effect and was offered for the same reason that circumcision and baptism, Passover and the Lord's Supper have been given to us. That is, they are designed to encourage us, to make us more sure of the promises of God, to make his purpose more clear to us – all the things that we are told here were served by God's swearing to Abraham.

Now, think about this. God had made a promise to Abraham. It could well be argued that a promise from God settles the matter, it leaves the future beyond dispute. Abraham certainly had no right to doubt a promise he had received from the living God himself. If God had said, "I made a promise to you before. My word never falls. It endures forever. It needs no confirmation. In fact, I shouldn't even have to repeat it. I said it once. That is all that you should need," I say, if God had spoken that way, we would have accepted the force of that logic. Who are we, after all, to doubt a word from God himself?

But, in an act of wonderful condescension, God stooped down to meet Abraham in his weakness. God knows how difficult it is for us to believe what we have been promised. After all, not only are those promises a long time in coming, many of them run counter to all the evidence of our eyes. In Abraham's case, the promise of a son was made when Sarah was already past her childbearing years, but then, to make matters much worse, years were to pass before a son was born to them. And, of course, all he ever saw with his own eyes was the one son; he never saw the great people that was to come from him. And, as we read in Hebrews 11, he only saw the heavenly country from afar, by faith; he only eventually owned one small parcel of the Promised Land, a burial plot, much less did he possess the heavenly country of which Canaan was the pledge. It is not easy, as the years pass, to believe things that one does not see; and, for us, it is not easy to continue to believe when we have not seen it, our fathers have not seen it, our distant ancestors have not seen it.

God knows our frame. He remembers that we are dust. And so, for the sake of Abraham's faith, he swore an oath, so that Abraham could rest his confidence on two things: the promise of the God who does not and cannot lie and the oath that God swore on his own name because there is no greater name by which he might swear. And we have still more to encourage us and to confirm us in faith. We have God's promise and his oath, as Abraham did, for that swearing was for "us" as well as for him, as we read in vv. 17-18, and we also have Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection as a guarantee.

But, even with that, we struggle to believe as surely as we should. You know it and I know it. We do not live in the strong, present confidence of our heavenly reward nearly as much as we should. We do not make our decisions, we do not endure our trials, we do not resist our temptations, we do not rejoice in our salvation nearly so well as we would if the confidence of our unseen inheritance was coursing through our souls. Why, many of us have had experiences of what glorious joy and peace and strength we have and in which we can live, when, in a moment or for a time, the truth of God's promise was made a living power in our hearts. I remember such moments in my life and will remember them until my dying day. I remember how I wished I could always think and feel and live as I lived then. I remember what a delicious pleasure it was to serve the Lord when the joy of salvation was flooding my own heart. Experiences like that are from God and amount to the same sort of help that he gave Abraham when he swore an oath. In many different ways God acts to confirm our faith in his Word and promise. You remember ways in which God showed himself to you, proved himself to you, made you as sure of the gospel as you are sure of your own existence. And those are great days, great experiences, and we are right to thank God for them all our lives. If only it could always be like that.

But it is not always so; it is not often so. And God knows this. He has determined that our lives should not be lived by sight but by faith. And caring for us and loving us as he does, he acts also in more ordinary and customary ways to strengthen and encourage our faith and assure us of the certainty of his promises, those ancient promises the fulfillment of which we still cannot see. And so he has added to his Word, his promise, these additional encouragements that we know as *the sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper*. It is, I think, a wonderful way to think about these rites that we practice in the church. There are other ways to think about them, as I said, other ways they serve us and bless us and help us, but this is an important way to think about them and this is an important part of their function: the encouragement of faith and the confirmation of our assurance.

In 1589, in an immortal series of sermons preached at St. Giles Kirk in Edinburgh, Robert Bruce, the Scottish Reformation pastor, explained to his congregation what the sacraments were for and how they worked. These were people, of course, who had been taught a virtually magical view of the sacraments. The teaching of the medieval church, which had prevailed in the Scottish Church until just a few years before, was that grace was imparted physically through the bread which had become the actual physical body of Christ – the ordinary churchgoer did not receive the wine, which had become the actual blood of Christ – by a miracle that took place at the altar every time the mass was said. Faith in this system of religious thought and practice was little more than the lack of any active disagreement with the church and its doctrine. It was not a living daily communion with Jesus Christ based upon his promises offered in the gospel. It was not the active commitment of the heart to Jesus as one's Lord and Savior. It was merely a willingness to observe the round of ceremonies required. This is what makes Hebrews so relevant to the Roman Catholic issue. The religious situation envisaged and spoken against in Hebrews is, for most purposes, the same spiritual situation created by Roman Catholic theology and worship. And, of course, very often in normal Protestant worship also.

So, it was necessary for Robert Bruce to replace the view of the sacraments that still prevailed in many minds. To go back to the Bible and build a view of the purpose and the working of the Lord's Supper and Baptism from the ground up. And Bruce was a master at doing this: he had a knack for putting things simply. After pointing out the errors in the old view of the sacraments that these people had grown up with, he came to this practical question: what are the sacraments for? If you look at the Bible, one becomes a Christian by faith in Christ and remains a Christian by living a life of faith. It is the Word of God, the Gospel, by which we come to know Jesus and believe in him. So what do the sacraments do that the Word, the Gospel do not do? An obvious and important question. There is nothing in the Lord's Supper, for example, that isn't already and more completely in the Gospel. The message of Christ's death, his love, his resurrection, his coming again, his being with us in the world, his promise to nourish and sustain us. All of that is depicted in the Lord's Supper, but it is much more comprehensively explained and promised to us in the Gospel. These are the very things that we are promised if only we will believe in Jesus Christ. So what do we need the Lord's Supper for? Here is Robert Bruce:

“Why then is the sacrament appointed? Not that you may get any new thing, but that you may get the same thing better than you had it in the Word. The sacrament is appointed that we may get a better hold of Christ than we got in the simple Word.... That Christ

may have more room in which to reside in our narrow hearts than He could have by the hearing of the simple Word, and that we may possess him more fully, is a better thing.

The sacraments...serve to seal up and confirm the truth that is in the Word. ... Although you believed the evidence before, yet by the seals, you believe it better. ... for the more the outward senses are awakened, the more is the inward heart and mind persuaded to believe.

Now the Sacrament awakens all the outward senses, such as the eye, the hand, and all the rest. When the outward senses are moved, without doubt the Holy Spirit concurs, moving the heart all the more. ... The Word is appointed to work belief, and the Sacrament is appointed to confirm you in this belief..." [*The Mystery of the Lord's Supper*, 64-65]

In other words, Bruce says the sacraments work to the same purpose as that oath that God swore to Abraham. Abraham already had the Word of God, his promise, but so that Abraham might be more sure of that Word, have a better grasp of it, God added the oath. The same point is made when the Bible calls the sacraments "seals," for seals do just that. They confirm. They add no new information; they don't change what is on the page; they confirm it and encourage interested parties to believe it and trust it. And the same point is made when the Bible calls the sacraments "signs." A sign is just a picture of something, a representation, and what it represents is the gospel of salvation in Christ, and it is given to us *so that we can see it, at least a little*, see it and be the more encouraged to believe it.

We accept the need for such encouragements, such confirmations, all the time in life. It is not enough for a man to propose marriage to a woman. He gives her a ring at the same time; something for her to wear on her hand, something to declare publicly his intention and her assent. It is not enough simply to speak your love. You also embrace, because that more physical, outward, sensible communication confirms and makes us feel the force of what was in those words that were spoken. It is not enough to be called to the witness stand, but you must swear publicly before the court, still in some places with your hand on a Bible, that you will tell the truth and nothing but the truth.

So, next Lord's Day morning, when you come to the Lord's Table, and when you take the bread and then the wine, remember the kindness that God is showing you. Remember the vow he made to Abraham and why he made it. Remember that he is encouraging your faith, seeking to assure you of what you have been promised in the gospel of God. Take the bread and the wine with that understanding, that God is once again confirming his promises to you. The sacraments don't, to be sure, make the Christian life any less a matter of faith; we must believe what we can't see even in the Lord's Supper, just as Abraham had to believe the vow just as he had to believe God's promise in the first place. But God knows our frame and knows what will help us believe, what will assure us that we can count on his promises absolutely. And he has given us baptism and the Lord's Supper for that purpose and we should prize those rites for the reason for which they have been given and seek from them that confirmation of faith we are always needing more of. And when you need reminding what the sacraments are for or want to help another

understand and appreciate baptism and the Lord's Supper, turn to Hebrews 6:13-20, and read again what God does "so that we may be greatly encouraged."