

AN ANCHOR FOR THE SOUL

By: David Ervin



A matter of no small concern to the Christian's walk in Christ is the security of his position. To be found in Christ today is a great comfort to the soul— but will that place of safety hold fast?

There is no shortage of dangers that threaten to shipwreck the faithful. From without the Christian is assaulted and allured by

the unbelieving world (1 John 3:13). From within the remnants of the fallen nature place the Christian in peril (Romans 7:21-23). Any honest believer need not conduct a long search to discover that the flesh is weak. In the quiet moments of the heart, when defenses are down, he must confess with the Apostle Paul, "What a wretched man I am" (Romans 7:24).¹ To the man who has been made by God to see his own depravity, it is painfully clear that he lacks the ability to endure in obedience and faith (Romans 7:18). Given sufficient amount of time and opportunity, such a man knows he will fail to keep the law of God (Romans 7:14). How then can a Christian have hope in any promise of God, which he currently lays claim to in Christ, when both the world and his own flesh seem certain to undue it? And if the believer's resolve is uncertain, what of God's resolve? Will God make good on his promises? How can the believer be certain that God will not change his mind? What if his patience runs out? Will God do all that he said he will do for the believer in Christ? It is to these uncertainties that God is zealous to answer

¹All Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing Company, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984).

and give assurance to his people. In the letter to the Hebrews, God has spoken through the author's pen to give the church such assurance.

Hebrews is filled with the theme of hope in the promises of God in Christ (Hebrews 3:6; 6:11). The letter is written to a group of Jewish Christians who were in danger of losing hope in those promises (Hebrews 10:35). Their conversion to Christianity brought with it tremendous persecution (Hebrews 10:32-34). As a result, some considered abandoning their faith in Christ Jesus and returning to Judaism (Hebrews 2:1-3). The frequent refrain of the letter is an appeal to hold fast in the confidence of God's faithfulness: "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful" (Hebrews 10:23).

In Hebrews 6:13-20, God goes to extraordinary measures to encourage all those who have taken refuge in Christ:

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." And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised. Men 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 of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

What a very relevant text for the believer to dwell on. It dissolves uncertainty and chases away doubts like shadows. Well does God know the heart of his people to say these things. God knows that there are days when hope is hard to hold on to. He knows that there are times in the believer's walk when hope is fleeting. And so God did something

amazing so that, "we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged" (Hebrews 6:18).

This passage in Hebrews makes reference to Abraham and uses an event in this Old Testament patriarch's life to show the unchanging nature of the promises of God in Christ. Late in life (when most men are ready to settle down), God instructs Abraham to get up—and start packing. God commands Abraham to leave his home, his father's house, and everything he has ever known (Genesis 12:1). Such a command is more than enough to stretch the faith of a faithful man but in addition to the difficulty is the fact that Abraham does not even know where he is going (Hebrews 11:8). "Go to the land I will show you", says God, "and I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on the earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:1-3). Abraham believes God—and his journey begins.

Years went by and nothing happened. Abraham heard the call to leave Haran at the age of seventy-five (Genesis 12:4). Isaac was born when Abraham reached the century mark (Genesis 21:5). The two and a half decades in-between produced only waiting, frustration, and Ishmael. Hebrews 6:15 notes that, "after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised." But this statement in Hebrews is only a summary of events. Though it is certainly true that Abraham waited patiently, the Genesis record reveals that there were days when Abraham was filled with doubt. The father of the faithful was not so different from any other believer. After ten years of living in Canaan he was eighty-five years old and still waiting for life to begin. God had promised to do

the impossible in Abraham's life, but he grew impatient with the speed of God's agenda and took the matter into his own hands by having a child through his servant Hagar (Genesis 16:3-4).

Abraham's struggle is the fight of every Christian to see through the frustration of the moment. It is the fight of faith to trust in the integrity and reliability of God's word when every visible circumstance seems to deny it. Abraham's laps of faith demonstrates clearly that his own resolve is insufficient to ensure the promises. In order for Abraham (and any believer) to find security in the future blessing of God, his confidence must be anchored to something external to himself.

The promises of God to Abraham fall into three categories—land, descendants, and blessing. Behind every one of these earthly realities lies a bigger, spiritual reality. As Arthur Pink describes, “each of the promises to Abraham receives a double fulfilment: a "letter" and a "spirit" or, as we prefer to designate them, a carnal and a spiritual.”² The promise of land is a literal grant of real-estate in Canaan (Genesis 17:8), but the land promise is understood by Abraham to find its *ultimate* fulfilment in a heavenly land, “for he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:10). The promise of descendants speaks of a physical nation born from Abraham's own flesh (Genesis 17:15-16), but the promise of children looks further to a spiritual race of the faithful for, “it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring” (Romans 9:8).

²Arthur Walkington Pink, *The Divine Covenants* (Memphis, TN: Bottom of the Hill Publishing, 2011), p. 69.

God's promise of blessing to Abraham certainly includes earthly prosperity yet looks further to a glorious spiritual reality. As again Pink explains, "Our finite minds are incapable of defining the capacity of God to bless, or to adequately comprehend all that such a statement includes."³ The ultimate fulfilment of this promised blessing is the salvation provided by Abraham's greatest descendent, Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:16).

The promises made to Abraham are nothing short of the Gospel. It is the promise of eternal blessing and inheritance through his promised seed (which is ultimately Christ). These promises are framed in the form of a covenant. A biblical covenant is a "bond in blood sovereignly administered."⁴ Similar to a contract, a covenant is an agreement between two parties that involves blessings, stipulations, and penalties. However, unlike a contract which often involves two *equal* parties, a covenant frequently involves two parties of unequal status.⁵ The biblical covenant is often compared to ancient treaties made between a suzerain and a lesser, vassal kingdom.⁶ The vassal king agrees to the covenant but not as an equal party. A further distinction between a covenant and a contract is that a covenant is unto the death. A breach of contract may involve stiff penalties, but to breach a covenant is to forfeit one's life. God enters into just such a covenant with Abraham.

³Ibid.

⁴O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1980), p. 4.

⁵Douglas Van Dorn, *Covenant Theology: A Reformed Baptist Primer* (Erie, CO: Waters of Creation Publishing, 2014), p. 10.

⁶Ibid., 13.

The benefits of the covenant to Abraham are clear; however, the obligations of the covenant are conspicuously one sided. God speaks repeatedly of what *he will do* for Abraham. Though the Abrahamic Covenant is not devoid of law (Abraham is required to go to Canaan for example), it is decidedly gracious in nature. The fact that God chooses to enter into a covenant at all with Abraham demonstrates the graciousness of the covenant. Abraham becomes the target of God's benevolence not because he is good but because God is good. God declares how Abraham will be blessed in terms of certainties that cannot fail. The promises are not framed on the basis of Abraham's performance but, rather, upon God's faithfulness. Yet despite the certain nature of the promises, by Genesis chapter fifteen Abraham is filled with uncertainty.

God appears to Abraham once more to remind him of the covenant, "I am your shield, your very great reward" (Genesis 15:1). But Abraham is not convinced and complains that for all his earthly wealth he has no heir. The blessings God has bestowed upon Abraham will end with his death. He will be forced to leave behind any blessing God has given him to his servant Eliezer (Genesis 15:2-3). God bids Abraham to look up at the stars and count the number of his descendants. Abraham believes this (humanly) impossible promise and is saved on the basis of that faith (Genesis 15:6). But even though he is filled with saving faith, Abraham still harbors lingering doubts. At God's insistence that he will obtain the promises, Abraham replies, "O Sovereign Lord, *how can I know?*" (emphasis added, Genesis 15:8). Like every other believer after him, Abraham struggles with assurance when his outward circumstances mock the promises of God. The

plea of all the faithful is upon his heart, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief" (Mark9:24).

With a gracious desire for Abraham to be sure of the promises, God does an incredible thing. He instructs Abraham to slaughter some animals and arrange the pieces on the ground in rows (Genesis 15:9-10). What seems strange to the modern observer is plain to Abraham's world. God is ratifying the covenant agreement in blood (Genesis 15:18). In the Ancient Near East, a covenant was not signed—it was cut.⁷ This procedure that God commands Abraham to arrange is the taking of a *blood oath*. The slaughter of the animals signifies a pledge unto the death. The slain animals symbolize the curse that the covenant-maker calls down upon himself if the promises made are not kept.⁸

Abraham prepares the animals as instructed and waits to see what God will do. Perhaps Abraham imagines that he will be required to stand in the midst of the slaughtered animals and make certain vows. This is the essence of religion—a bargain with God to obtain his blessing through human effort. Man deludes himself by thinking that through his comings, goings, and doings he can put the eternal God in his debt.

Abraham falls into a deep sleep as he waits, but his slumber is interrupted by a great vision. He witnesses a display of fire and smoke in the middle of the slaughtered beasts (Genesis 15:17). This burning theophany is *God himself* walking between the carcasses. Abraham does not walk between the pieces. It will not ultimately be left to Abraham's strength and resolve to ensure the covenant blessings. God himself moves

⁷Robertson, p. 8.

⁸Ibid., 10.

among the blood and the slaughter. In doing this God places his own immutable being on the line. God declares in this act that his own eternal life is forfeit if the promises are not kept. God swears an end to his own existence if the covenant is not maintained.

This covenant with Abraham is not for him alone. Every believer in Christ has an interest in it. "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:29). This covenant is a promise of the gospel in shadow form. It is the promise of the blessing of Christ for the salvation of his people. Through Abraham (the covenant head) God is declaring to all of his elect that he will perform his purposes in Christ. God swears to take upon himself the responsibility that Abraham (and all of his spiritual descendants) will never cease to be the target of divine blessing. The writer to the Hebrews looks to this covenant as a basis for the Christian's assurance. The believer is confident of the continuing favor of God in Christ on the basis of two impossible actions that took place when God walked between the pieces (Hebrews 6:18).

The first impossible action is that God cannot lie (Hebrews 6:18, Titus 1:2). This is not to say that there is a law standing above God to which he is compelled to obey (for such a law would then be God). The impossibility of falsehood to be found in God is by the sheer compulsion of his own nature and character. There is nothing more certain than the word of God. He is a promise keeper. God's word alone is sufficient to end all doubt for the believer. And yet, as if God desires to go to infinite lengths to reassure his people, he adds still another impossibility.

The second impossible action is that God cannot break his oath. In a modern courtroom setting, the witness is required to swear an oath to tell the truth. It is interesting that the secular world abandons its embrace of relative truth when it comes time to testify in court. In that situation only objective truth will due. Under lesser circumstances, the mere word of a witness is often sufficient. But in the court room setting, truthful testimony is so important that two assurances are required of the witness. The witness is required to give both his word and his oath. Though God's word alone is more than enough assurance, "because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath" (Hebrews 6:17). God piles assurance upon assurance to his people by adding an oath to his word.

When an oath is sworn in court today, the witness places his hand on a Bible. The purpose of this is for the oath taker to lay his hand on something greater than himself. The oath is made on the basis of an appeal to something greater. "Men swear by someone greater than themselves" (Hebrews 6:16). The hand on the Bible is an appeal to something above the oath taker. Yet as God takes the oath before Abraham, he looks up and there is no one above him. "The Lord is exalted over all the nations, his glory above all the heavens" (Psalms 113:4). God looks to his left and to his right and finds no equal. "There is none beside me. I am the Lord and there is none other" (Isaiah 45:6). Finding nothing greater to lay his hand on, God places his hand upon his own person. "When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself" (Hebrews 6:13).

God has promised to bless the spiritual descendants of Abraham forever in Christ. For the blood-bought Christian, two impossible things must happen before the promises of God in Christ toward him can fail: God must become a liar and God must break his covenant oath. These two impossibilities stand as mighty, twin assurances that God will be faithful to save his elect.

Because of this incredible position of assurance, the Hebrew author describes this covenant hope as an anchor for the soul, "firm and secure" (Hebrews 6:19). In order for an anchor to work it must be both connected to the boat and to the bottom of the lake. The anchor must reach into a place that is otherwise not accessible. If the believer's confidence is anchored to anything in this world it can never be secure (for everything in this present world is shifting like the waves). Likewise, the believer's *own* resolve to be faithful to God tosses back and forth like the sea. He can no more fix his confidence in his own determination than can an anchor be fixed in the water. What makes Christian hope so secure is that it is not anchored to anything in this present realm. "It [the anchor] enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf" (Hebrews 6:9). Christian hope transcends the mutability of this life and the frailty of the flesh because it is rooted in unchanging covenant promises.

The Hebrew writer makes reference to the holy place in the Old Testament tabernacle that represents the immediate presence of God. Access to that presence is bared by a thick veil (Exodus 30:6). But on one dark Friday, Jesus the high priest entered the heavenly tabernacle. He went beyond the veil and sat down at the right hand of God. The *hope anchor* of the believer is secure because it has been cast into the holy place

beyond the veil. The anchor of the soul is fixed on Christ himself who, "went before us" (Hebrews 6:20) and is enthroned as the believer's surety. Having such a firm connection, the believer can sing in troubled times: "When darkness veils his lovely face, I rest on his unchanging grace; In every high and stormy gale, my anchor holds within the veil."⁹

⁹Edward Mote, *My Hope is Built on Nothing Less* (No. 295) in *Hymns of the Christian Life* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1978).

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