

## **“Oaths and Anchors”**

Hebrews 6:13-20

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### **Oaths, Anchors, Abraham, and Melchizedek?**

This is the second time in about as many months that I’ve been asked to preach a text that doesn’t make a whole lot of sense on first read. Sure, it’s full of great one-liners, and some of them might even be familiar. If you’ve been in a Hobby Lobby lately, you’ve surely seen an anchor - maybe a rusty anchor, maybe a flowery anchor, maybe a neon anchor. They have aisles full of anchors on wall hangings, pillows, and picture frames.

But even if the anchor is familiar and even if Abraham is familiar, and even if (less likely) that whole business about oath swearing or the priestly line of Melchizedek is familiar, there’s something sort of peculiar about the way those themes get put together. Because of that, I’m going to do something I don’t recall ever doing in a sermon before. I’m going to give you the ending right here at the beginning.

The author of Hebrews is making sure we know that the way we feel doesn’t define the reality in which we live. The main point, the big takeaway of this passage is that hope exists whether we feel hopeful or not. Hope is very much alive, even in the deepest, darkest places of hopelessness where we can’t feel hopeful.

I know some of your stories in part, and very few in whole. But I know enough to know that wherever you are in this room, you’re a stone’s throw away from at least one person who understands what hopelessness feels like. And I can tell you that I’ve spent some long nights dwelling in the depths of darkness, feeling like all hope was lost. Hebrews 6 is a message of encouragement for those who are feeling hopeless.

Even if we know the main idea at the beginning, this passage still leaves some unanswered questions. I can’t answer them all, but I’m going to try to hit on three questions that have come up this week as I’ve been talking with some of you in preparation for today’s worship service: First, “What’s going on with the promise and the oaths?” Second, “What does Abraham have to do with anything?” And third, “Can we unravel that convoluted metaphor where an anchor enters the sanctuary like Melchizedek?”

### **Promises and Oaths**

Let’s start with the business of making promises and swearing oaths. Taking an oath isn’t very common in our world. We might say things that sound like an oath. Kids will

sometimes try to convince friends they're being serious by making a pinky swear or saying "I cross my heart and hope to die." We might say, "I swear on my mother's grave," or "I swear to God," as we plead with someone to believe us. My favorite oath I've heard lately came from one of our kids' friends. "I swear on the whole world!" he said. It sounded powerful, but of course, it meant nothing. Not to mention that he was using it in the middle of some outlandish story that was definitely not true! Our oaths tend to be conversational devices more than something that's actually legally binding.

The situation was different in the first centuries of the church. At that time, the people who are described in the New Testament (and even the people who wrote it) were living in an oral culture. An oral culture is one where speech is the primary way that people communicate, do business, pass on their histories, share news. When words are all you have, words carry more weight. It's not that our words don't matter now - but they don't matter in the same way. In biblical times, a person was only as good as his word. A promise was generally kept because it would be devastating to all areas of life - private and public - if somebody were caught in a lie. But that promise could be made even stronger by swearing an oath.

The point of an oath was to appeal to someone more powerful and more important than the person taking the oath. That way, if there was ever a dispute about the content of the oath, that more powerful party was the one who would end the argument and dole out punishment to whoever had broken their word. In the Old Testament, the people of God are told they can only take oaths in God's name (as opposed to the other gods that their neighbors might swear by). They're allowed to take oaths as long as they do it well.

We are not an oath-swearing people. But we are a document-signing, notarizing, multiple-witness kind of people. Back in the middle of 2020, Josh and I were newlyweds and decided to get our estate documents in order. The first time we went in to talk with our attorney, the three of us sat in a large conference room around a table that would easily fit 10-12 people. It was comical, but I figured, "It's 2020, we're all doing this social distancing thing, the law firm is probably just being extra-cautious." So we sat there, three of us in a much-too-large room, and talked about what we wanted in our wills. A few weeks later when we returned to finalize the documents, the larger room made sense. Instead of three of us, there were at least 6! Someone was making copies of our drivers licenses, multiple copies of each of our estate documents were presented to each of us, and then we signed, a witness signed, and a notary public notarized. I think I signed half a forest that day. In our world, that's our version of taking an oath. Long before I signed those documents, I had told Josh what I wanted if I should be in an accident or become incapacitated in some way. We had a verbal agreement of how those situations would be handled. That was the promise. Now we also have signed and legally binding records to prove what our conversation was about. We may not need it, but it's there just in case there's ever confusion or doubt or dispute about it. That was the oath.

But that still lives one very big, very important question – why does *God* need to swear an oath? Isn't God's word already unbreakable, unchanging, and true?

I've read quite a bit on this over the past week or two, and the answer that makes the most sense to me both practically and theologically is that God swears an oath not because he needs to, but because we need him to. God's oath to help us have more confidence. God absolutely does not need to swear an oath in order to make him keep his promise or hold himself accountable. But God might need to swear an oath to help people who live in a world of unkept promises and untrustworthy people remember just how sure and unchanging his promises are.

You and I sometimes need some help trusting God's promises. The great heroes of the faith needed some help trusting God's promises. One of the most famous of those heroes of faith who needed a little help with their faith is Abraham.

### **Promises to Abraham**

When the writer of Hebrews mentions God's promise to Abraham, he is convinced that his audience is tracking with him instantly. And while some of us will read a line like "When God made his promise to Abraham" and know what's going on, there are probably more of us who know about God, know about Abraham, but don't recall exactly what happened between them.

The exact incident that the author is referring to when he talks about God swearing by himself comes from Genesis 22. In that passage, Abraham had heard God tell him to take his only son, Isaac, and offer him as a sacrifice. The idea of God asking Abraham to sacrifice his son is, in a word, problematic. It raises a whole host of deep theological questions, none of which we're going to work on today. Sometime, we'll preach through Genesis, and when we do, we can dive much more deeply into this story. What matters for today is that Isaac is Abraham's only son. The promise that God has made to Abraham is that he would have many descendants. In this moment, God is asking Abraham to close the only visible door by which that promise might be fulfilled.

But there's so much more to the story than that.

The first time God makes this promise to Abraham is all the way back in Genesis 12, when he tells him "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you." By the time we get to Genesis 15, about 10 years have gone by. God comes to Abraham again, and Abraham questions God about why he still has no son. Ten years is a really long time to wait to conceive a child. Abraham must have had his fair share of doubt, frustration, and hopelessness in that decade. But God reaffirms the promise, and tells Abraham his offspring will be as numerous as the stars in the night sky. Another 14 years go by, and God tells Abraham - who, now 24 years after the first promise, still doesn't have the son he was promised - that he "will be the father of many nations." Abraham, in one of my

favorite moments of the Old Testament, laughs in disbelief. It's been 24 years. He's a very old man. He has a very old wife. That's not a formula for successful conception.

But about a year later, the promised son is born. They name him Isaac, which means "he laughs." It's a ridiculous fulfillment to a promise that appeared to be broken over and over again. I can't begin to guess how many times Abraham doubted God in the 25 years between hearing the promise and holding baby Isaac. I wonder how often he lay awake at night, doubting himself and whether he had understood the promise. But these doubts have been laid to rest when this child arrives.

Then, some years later, God tells Abraham to take the boy Isaac into the wilderness and to sacrifice him to God. The promise to Abraham was that he would have many descendants. He waited 25 years for his son to be born. And now God has asked him to give up Isaac, the only person on earth who is capable of carrying on his name and his lineage, the only possible fulfillment of the promise. Abraham spent about twice as many years waiting for Isaac to be born as he had with Isaac in his home. And just like that, the promise that seemed impossible for a quarter century, which had been miraculously fulfilled, is about to be snuffed out.

Then at the last possible moment, God intervenes and Abraham puts down the knife.

Abraham has had the whole range of human experience on this journey, but this might be one of the worst parts for him. And it's into this moment that is bursting with confusion and grief that God puts an oath on top of a promise. If ever there were a time when humans might need some extra help believing a promise, I think this is it. Abraham was given hope, felt hope slip through his fingers, grasped back on to hope, and was moments away from putting hope to death with his own hands. And then God tells him, "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 and the sand of the seashore." (Genesis 22:16-17)

It makes sense to me that God might offer some extra assurance to Abraham. It's easy to look at another person's journey and think that the promise should have been enough, hearing directly from God should have been enough, encountering angels should have been enough. And maybe that's true. But we can't deny that this was one rough and rocky journey that Abraham had traveled. God, very mercifully, gives Abraham the second of the "two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie" - first in his promise, and again in his oath. It's a double-dose of certainty, despite the fact that at many times, over many years, it all looked to be anything but certain.

### **Anchors for Us**

This is where the author of Hebrews comes back to his audience and to us. Those "two unchangeable things" - God's promise and God's oath - weren't just for Abraham, he says. They were for us. He says that God did this so that "we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged." This language is refugee

language - “we who have fled.” The author of Hebrews sees himself as a part of a people who are on the move, people who are desperately seeking safety and security. People who are desperately seeking God. Although by many standards, we live pretty safe and secure lives, we nonetheless share that identity as those who are in desperate need of an anchor.

The image of an anchor, introduced in verse 19, means exactly what it appears to mean. An anchor is what holds a boat secure and keeps it steadily in place. There’s a lot of value in an anchor. The problem with anchors is that, when they’re doing their job, we can’t see them. If you’re in a boat and the anchor is at the bottom of the lake or the ocean, the only evidence you can see might be some rope going off the side of your boat. As the author of Hebrews will make abundantly clear in a few more chapters, it takes faith to trust in something you cannot see.

This, I think, is where we find the real meat of this text. Hope is like an anchor, and it makes no difference whether we can see that hope or whether we feel anchored. There is an objective reality - either you’re securely anchored or you’re not. I have two videos to help me illustrate this point. For the videos to make sense, you need to know two things. First, that the Rinehults family loves a ropes course. And second, that we’re a little obsessed with our GoPro. My people and I take our GoPro on ropes courses, on zip lines, in the whitewater raft, down waterslides, on rollercoasters, into the pool, on horseback rides, on kayak trips, to the trampoline park, down the snow tubing lanes, and pretty much anywhere you’re told not to take expensive electronics.

In this first video, you’ll see why my dad refers to his grandchildren as “spider monkeys.” These kids are great climbers and they’re much stronger than their tiny little bodies would make you believe. And when they’re feeling secure and confident, they do really cool stuff, like take the steps two at a time, or barely hang on to the ropes around them. In the first part, you might notice that they didn’t even wait for me to get to the platform with them, they just take off across the obstacle! This is what it looks like when they’re feeling securely anchored.

As parents, those are the moments that Josh and I love. They’re doing hard things, but they’re doing them confidently and courageously. But I also have a second video to show you. In this next video, our kids were feeling very differently than they were in the first clip. In this video, they’re definitely waiting for me to get to the platform. In fact, I’m spending a lot of time coaxing them off the platform, trying to explain to them in every way I can think of that they are perfectly safe, and that there isn’t another way down to the ground except to keep going forward. About a minute into this video, we get to listen to a great conversation between Josh and Seth, who was about 8.5 years old at the time. Josh is easy to hear, but Seth’s voice is quieter and farther from the camera. He says to Josh, “I’m scared.” Josh asks, “Of what?” Seth answers, “Of my sister falling.” Josh answers, “Do you remember what happens if she starts to fall? She can’t fall. It’s impossible.”

To tell you the truth - we love these moments as parents too - when our kids dig down deep, summon up their courage and strength, and do something that feels scary to them. The best thing about those two videos and the thing that makes them so relevant for today is that they were recorded on the same day. They were recorded on the same ropes course. The kids were still buckled into the same harnesses, clipped by the same carabiners onto the same thick steel cable. They had not been disconnected at any point, and they had not changed equipment along the way. In terms of the objective reality, they were exactly as safe in the second video as they were in the first.

All that had changed was what they could feel. The cables beneath their feet were a little more shaky. The ropes and beams around them were closer than before and bumping into them. They could feel the trees sway a little bit more. Feeling a different sensation shook them out of the headspace they were in during the first video. In that first one, the obstacles were pretty steady. They weren't thinking about their harness or their anchors because they didn't realize they needed them. In the first video, they were dashing across the obstacles because they felt like they were able to walk normally.

Nobody is worried about having an anchor when they don't realize they need one. But sometimes the wind shifts, and we realize we don't have quite as much control as we thought we did. We realize that we need a lifeline to something beyond ourselves, if we're going to make it. The author of Hebrews knows that even for believers, life sometimes feels like a storm-tossed ship. Or maybe sometimes it feels like you're balanced precariously on a narrow wire high up in the trees. You might feel as though all hope is lost. It may look like God has packed up his promises, and left you behind. Hebrews 6 reminds us that God's promises are as unbreakable as the most iron-clad legal document ever produced and God's presence is as immovable as the strongest anchor ever crafted.

The last two verses tie up this whole section. There are some mixed metaphors, but the point is easy enough to see. Jesus is our hope. Jesus is our anchor. Jesus has entered the "inner sanctuary" - meaning that he is present with God. And as a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek, it means he's not moving from that spot.

Unlike a boat, we are anchored up to Jesus, not down to the ground. We are connected to him so that we can move with him, not stay still. The people of God are people on the move and people on a mission. But we do not float aimlessly on the sea or swing through the trees with abandon. As our anchor, Jesus holds us steady and near him through the winds and waves of life. It doesn't mean we're insulated from trials, it doesn't mean we will always feel his presence, or that we'll always understand what he's up to. But it does mean that we have this double-guarantee of a promise and an oath that God is good, that he loves us, that we are his, and that we are secure.

Sometimes we see it clearly, sometimes we feel him holding us tightly. Other times, we feel lost at sea or shaking on a high wire. But our changing feelings don't change the reality God has declared. Jesus stays the same in every situation, always. Our hope is real, and it is certain, and it is unchanging, whether we happen to feel hopeful or not.