

The Power to Persevere Through Promises

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16 For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation *is* for them an end of all dispute. 17 Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed *it* by an oath, 18 that by two immutable things, in which it *is* impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before *us*.

19 This *hope* we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the *Presence* behind the veil, 20 where the forerunner has entered for us, *even* Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. (Heb. 6:13-20)

One of the greatest novels written in English is Pilgrim's Progress, written in 1678. Some consider it the very first novel in English. It has never been out of print, translated in 200 languages and one of the top selling books of all time. In the story of Pilgrim's Progress, Pilgrim leaves the Main Highway and follows another Path which seemed easier. But this Path leads him into the territory of Giant Despair who owns Doubting Castle. Eventually he is captured by Giant Despair and kept in a dungeon. He is advised to kill himself. The Giant said there was no use trying to keep on with his journey. For the time, it seemed as if Despair had really conquered Christian.

Now a little before it was day, good Christian, as one half-amazed, broke out in passionate speech, "What a fool am I thus to lie in a stinking Dungeon, when I may as well be at liberty. I have a Key in my bosom called Promise that will, I am persuaded, open any lock in Doubting Castle." Then said Hopeful, "That's good news. Good Brother, pluck it out of thy bosom and try." And the prison gates flew open.

Bunyan put that in his story because he knew that the promises of God have the power to overcome despair, and get us back on the road of persevering for Christ. The power to persevere through promises is what this section in Hebrews is all about.

In urging us to perseverance, he has already shown us that it is momentous. It is a sign of true salvation, of living faith, as opposed to dead faith. He has shown us that perseverance looks like ongoing love for God manifested in service to the saints. And he showed us two ways we persevere. One is to remember our reward. The second is to imitate those who inherit the promises. So verse 13, beginning with the word *for*, begins a short section on what promise pursuers are like. If we are to imitate them, we need to know what example they have set, we need to know what their expectancy is, and we need to know what kind of experience they have. So today, if you wish to persevere, then the Spirit of God says to you in this passage, imitate the promise pursuers. To do so, let us meditate deeply and focus carefully on three marks of promise pursuers, the example, the expectancy, and the experience.

I. The Example of Promise Pursuers

13 For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, 14 saying, "Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you." 15 And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise.

To give us one of the best examples of someone who persevered by promise, the writer brings up Abraham. Abraham is truly the patriarch of promise. In fact, we even speak of the time between Abraham and the giving of the Law under Moses as the dispensation of promise.

What promise did God make to Abraham? In Genesis 12, we read that God called him out of Ur of the Chaldees, when he was still an idolater, God promised that He would give Abram land, seed and

blessing. God would multiply Abram's descendants like the stars, and all nations of the world would be blessed through one of the descendants, God would give Abram's physical descendants a particular land for them to dwell in, and God would richly bless them.

But then in Genesis 15, God reminds and reiterates this promise.

Genesis 15:1 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I *am* your shield, your exceedingly great reward." 2 But Abram said, "Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house *is* Eliezer of Damascus?" 3 Then Abram said, "Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!" 4 And behold, the word of the LORD *came* to him, saying, "This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir." 5 Then He brought him outside and said, "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." 6 And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness. 7 Then He said to him, "I *am* the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it." 8 And he said, "Lord GOD, how shall I know that I will inherit it?" 9 So He said to him, "Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." 10 Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. 11 And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. 12 Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror *and* great darkness fell upon him. (Gen. 15:1-12)

God announces that there will be a 400-year delay before Abraham's descendants inherit the land completely. But then look at what happens next:

17 And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces. 18 On the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying: "To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates-- (Gen. 15:17-18)

In the ancient near-East, covenants were often made by dividing an animal in two, putting those two halves opposite each other and having those agreeing to the covenant walk through those pieces. It symbolised a penalty should anyone break this covenant. May this be done to me, if I violate the terms of this covenant, may I be killed and carved in two. But what is truly amazing here is that Abram doesn't walk between them. Instead, only God does, manifesting as a fiery torch. God is cutting an unconditional covenant with Abram. This is *not* something Abram has to do, it is something God is binding himself to do.

God reiterates the covenant again in chapter 17, this time changing Abram's name to Abraham, and instituting the sign of circumcision. But the final re-affirmation comes in chapter 22, where God tells Abraham to sacrifice his only son Isaac. Now Abraham must decide if he believes that God will give him land, seed, and blessing, if the only child he has, Isaac, is sacrificed. Can Abraham keep trusting the promises of God, even when God seems to be destroying the very means of fulfilling that promise? Abraham lifts the knife, and the Messenger of Yahweh, whom we believe to be the pre-incarnate Son of God calls out to Abraham to stop, for Abraham has proved his utter trust and devotion to God. Then we read in verse 15:

15 Then the Angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time out of heaven, 16 and said: "By Myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only *son*-- 17 "blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which *is* on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. 18 "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice." (Gen. 22:15-18)

God swears by Himself that again He promises to give Abraham blessing, seed, and an inheritance, which is the land.

What did Abraham do? What is the example we are to follow? 15 And so, after he had patiently

endured, he obtained the promise. Abraham kept on, he kept pursuing, because of the promises. God had said, I will give you this land, I will give you descendants, and I will bless you. That's why he kept living in tents in Canaan, instead of returning to a comfortable city in Ur of Chaldees. That's why he kept believing, even when his body reached its 100th year. It's why he could be willing to give up Isaac.

In fact, in chapter 11, the writer captures for us the marks of Abraham's patient faith:

8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as *in* a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; 10 for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker *is* God. 11 By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born *as many* as the stars of the sky in multitude-- innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore. 13 These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced *them* and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. 14 For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. 15 And truly if they had called to mind that *country* from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly *country*. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them. 17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten *son*, 18 of whom it was said, "In Isaac your seed shall be called," 19 concluding that God *was* able to raise *him* up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense. (Heb. 11:8-19)

So how did Abraham receive the promises, as 6:15 says, while here in verse 13 it says he did not receive the promises? Once he received Isaac back, he knew for certain that he had received the inheritance God promised. No, there were future aspects that he did not see: the descendants like the stars, the land occupied by them all, and spiritual blessing for them and all nations.

But here we are today. Abraham's physical descendants number around 14 million, and his spiritual descendants many millions more. The Jewish people occupied the land for 1400 years, and do again, and will again in the future. And most of all, the whole world has been blessed through the one descendant, Seed singular as Paul shows, the truest son of Israel, Jesus the Messiah.

All of that was future for Abraham. But he lived as if it were present. He brought the future into the present by trusting the promises of God.

Our text says, if you want to persevere, you must imitate someone like Abraham. You must patiently endure to obtain the promises.

Now that leads to a second question: what kept Abraham going in his promise-pursuit? Why was he able to do that? What did he see in the promises of God that perhaps we miss?

II. The Expectancy of Promise Pursuers

13 For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, 14 saying, "Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you¹."

16 For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation *is* for them an end of all dispute. 17 Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed *it* by an oath, 18 that by two immutable things, in which it *is* impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before *us*.

Verse 18 gives us our expectancy: two unchanging things. What are those two things?

First, God made this unconditional promise to Abraham. Now when God speaks, He can only speak

truth. God is truth. In Him is no lie. Verse 18 says it is impossible for God to lie. But second, as we saw, when Abraham is willing to sacrifice Isaac, God takes it further, and adds an oath to His promise. By myself I have sworn, God says.

Why do people make oaths? Verse 16 tells us. Oaths, sworn testimony, affidavits are a means of settling matters. They take your word, and invest it with extra reliability.

Whether it is testifying in a court of law, or making a binding agreement with an employer, or making vows in a wedding ceremony, or taking the oath of office, or entering into a membership covenant with other Christians, these settle things. They take matters from “well maybe I’ll do that if I can” or “perhaps it happened that way, perhaps it didn’t” to “I vow to do that” “I will do so” “It definitely happened that way”. In fact, these kinds of bonds and promises are the only way we make life work: contracts, agreements, courts of law, affidavits. If we didn’t have these, everything would dissolve.

And the only way we make this oaths valuable is that we swear on something higher and greater than ourselves – verse 16. It used to be that people placed their hand on the Bible symbolising promising in the presence of God and truth. People swear on penalty of prosecution. The Jews would swear by their heads, by the Temple, by Heaven. All of this is saying we swear by an authority greater than our own, an authority with the power to penalise us, prosecute us, or condemn us if we lie. I am a Commissioner of Oaths, and in the law it states that “An oath is administered by causing the deponent to utter the following words: “I swear that the contents of this declaration are true, so help me God”. An affirmation is administered by causing the deponent to utter the following words: “I truly affirm that the contents of this declaration are true”.

Now when God makes an oath, whom does He swear by? No one is greater than He. No one can penalise Him. 13 For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself,

Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed *it* by an oath,

And not having a power higher than Himself, God as it were, placed His hand on His own heart, and said, I swear, by Myself, that I will do what I said I would. Just as when He alone walked through the animals – may this be done to Me if I do not keep My Word.

Here is the expectancy of promise-pursuers:18 that by two immutable things, in which it *is* impossible for God to lie,

Two unchanging things: His unchanging, unlying Word, and His unchanging, unlying oath added to His word. The promise God makes, and God cannot lie, and on top of that promise, a sworn oath by God to keep His promise.

Now why would a God, who cannot lie, add an oath to His already true Word? But verse 17 shows that God is so gracious, so condescending, so kind, that in accommodation to us, and to demonstrate that His counsels, His purposes are immutable – unchanging – He added an oath to His promise. He says, God was determined to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel.

God wanted to clearly show that He does not change His mind, nor does He go back on His Word. His counsel, His purpose is immutable. God's plans do not develop; they do not alter, or adapt. God's promises don't have fine print which makes them effectively useless.

Not only do we have a God who doesn't lie, we have a loving God who wants us to know He is trustworthy. He doesn't have to add oaths to His Word. But his love for the heirs of promise leads Him to add a sworn oath on top of His own truthful Word.

This is the gentle and loving heart of One saying to people looking for whom to trust, "You can trust Me. All else is sinking sand. Everyone else will fail you, but my promises are never lies. And if that isn't enough, I vow by My own name that what I promise you is certain.

The expectancy of a promise pursuer is that the promises of God are the absolute certainties about the future. Think of how many other people's promises you are trusting in. You trust your boss will pay you at the end of the month if you keep working, or that your clients or customers will pay when you invoice them. You trust the pharmacist is giving you the right medicine and that it will work. You trust the insurance company will pay when you claim. You trust all sorts of future events based upon promises, and that's how you live in the present.

Now, all those promises are fallible, based as they are upon people who are limited, in some cases lying, and in some cases unable to deliver on what they promised. But we still build our lives around them.

But here you have promises from the God who cannot lie, who can always do what he says, who knows the future perfectly, and graciously adds an oath to the promises. How much of your life is built around those promises?

There are approximately 8,810 promises in the entire Bible. In the Old Testament there are 7,706 and in the New Testament there are 1,104 wonderful promises. Now not every one of them is directed to you as a New Testament believer, but a huge proportion of them are.

Outside of Jesus Christ, God has no pleasant promises for you. Ephesians 2 tells us that when you are without Christ,...strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. (Eph. 2:12)

But once in Christ, a wealth of promises opens up. For all the promises of God in Him *are* Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us. (2 Cor. 1:20)

Scripture has promises for men, promises for women. There are promises for children, and promises for the elderly. God gives promises to widows, promises to those unable to marry, promises to the barren. He has promises for those who are sick, and promises for those dying. Promises for the humble, for the generous, for the obedient. Promise of provision, promises of protection, promises for guidance, promises for wisdom. Promises for those anxious and afraid, promises for those in affliction, promises for those perplexed and in darkness. Promises of forgiveness, promises of an inheritance. Promises of His presence, of His love for us.

Spurgeon: "In my time of trouble I like to find a promise which exactly fits my need, and then to put my finger on it, and say, "Lord, this is thy word; I beseech thee to prove that it is so, by carrying it out in my case. I believe that this is your own writing; and I pray thee make it good to my faith." "Let us know the promises. Should we not carry them at our fingers' ends? Should we not know them better than anything else?"

*How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
is laid for your faith in His excellent Word!
What more can He say than to you He hath said,
who unto the Savior for refuge have fled?*

Do you live as if you are absolutely sure that what God says is future will come to pass in the present? Do you regard all other things in life as probabilities and possibilities, but live as if the promises of God are the only true certainties? Then you have the expectancy of a promise pursuer. And you will persevere.

So what does it feel like to live based upon promises?

III. The Experience of Promise Pursuers

we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us.

19 This *hope* we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the *Presence* behind the veil, 20 where the forerunner has entered for us, *even* Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. (Heb. 6:13-20)

This is the experience of those who live by God's promises: strong consolation. Strong encouragement, strong exhortation, comfort consolation. The experience you have when you are worried about something, and then someone comes along and assures you it is taken care of, and that there is no longer any danger, or any problem. This is the Christian experience of hope.

But Christian hope is not hope characterised by “if”. It is hope characterised by “when”. Christian hope is not maybe it will happen. Christian hope is set before us, and simply waiting for us.

He now gives us three images which explain what this hope is like.

First, it's like people who have fled for refuge from hopelessness to lay hold of hope. When Israel was first established, the Israelites were a people who had lived in Egypt and learned the rather brutal ways of the ancient Near-East. One of those ways was blood-feuds, endless acts of revenge from tribe to tribe of one person killed another. So God designated in Israel six cities of refuge. These cities were distributed through Israel so that there was one close enough for anyone in Israel. If you accidentally killed someone in some kind of accident, you could flee to these cities. There you would be safe from the families seeking revenge. No one could touch you as long as you were in the city. Once the High Priest died, you were released from that blood-feud and no one was allowed to attack you anywhere in Israel.

Living by God's promises is like running into city. After being chased by bloodthirsty, angry men seeking your life, you make it into that city, and you can begin a new life, safe from threat and danger and harm. A Christian living by promises has escaped the threats of judgement by God, attacks by Satan, the perils of living in a cursed and fallen world. You live in a city called the promises of God, where all things will ultimately work together for good.

Second, it is like a sure and steadfast anchor for your soul. The sea was a terrifying place in ancient times, and the one certainty when out on that expanse was that you could put an anchor down, and at least weather a storm. When you couldn't see land, and you seemed at the mercy of a storm, then an anchor was both sure and steadfast, or literally safe and unmoving.

The image of an anchor has been dear to Christians. In the catacombs where the early Christians met, the image of an anchor has been found at least 66 times.

We see why here. The anchor is actually a person.

Notice this anchor actually enters the presence behind the veil. The veil that separates God from man, Most Holy from Holy. This anchor is actually anchored there in the very presence of the Triune God. If He is anchored there, and He is attached to the ship of our souls, what then can harm us? Indeed 31 What then shall we say to these things? If God *is* for us, who *can be* against us? 32 He who

did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? 33 Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? *It is* God who justifies. 34 Who *is* he who condemns? *It is* Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. (Rom. 8:31-34)

Remember what M'Cheyne said, "If I could hear Christ praying for me in the next room, I would not fear a million enemies. Yet distance makes no difference. He is praying for me: "He ever liveth to make intercession."

Third, living by God's promises is like following the steps of a perfect guide. 20 where the forerunner has entered for us, *even* Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. This person the anchor, is also the forerunner. The forerunner has entered the Holy of Holies for us. But the High Priest was never called the forerunner in the Old Testament. That's because no one was expected to follow Him. He went in alone, came out alone, and repeated it the next year. But now with Jesus Christ, the High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek, we have a High Priest who is a forerunner, and says, where I am, there you shall be also. I go to prepare place for you. Every step you take you will find one of my footprints ahead of you, making the ground just that bit easier to tread on. Every promise comes with the guarantee that the great inheritor of all things is ahead of you, that the firstfruits from the dead has entered into His glory and is dispensing every gift and grace to His people. And finally, when you come home, you will not enter the holy place alone and terrified, but I will be there, calling you in.

Jesus is the one who has paid for the promises, guarantees the promises, and gives out the promises. With that refuge, that anchor, that forerunner, we have strong consolation. That leads us to persevere.

How is your imitation of the example of the promise-pursuers like Abraham going? Is your life built upon the expectancy of the twice confirmed Word of God to you, so that the only future you are 100% sure of is the one He tells you is coming to you? Are you taking in and memorising the promises? Is your experience one of strong consolation?

A pastor once visited an elderly man now almost crippled by rheumatism. He had his Bible on his lap. As the pastor looked, he could see a word written next to verses. Asking for permission to look more closely, he took the Bible in His hands, and saw what the man had done. On nearly every page, there was the word "proved". It was written next to a promise given, which that dear old saint had trusted in and seen come to pass. On page after page were underlinings and the word "proved". That's the Bible of one imitating the inheritors. That's how we persevere.