



## Hebrews - Chapter Six

- II Hebrews 3:1-10:18 - Jesus Is Superior to the Mosaic Law (continues)
- II.c Hebrews 4:14-10:18 - The high priesthood of Jesus (continues)
- II.c.ii Hebrews 5:11-6:12 - Pause in the argument: warning against apostasy (continues/concludes)

### Summary of Chapter Six

The author commences this chapter by stating that believers need to become mature, moving beyond the basics of their faith, warning of the perils that await those who fall into apostasy and reminding them of the rewards for those who persevere in their faith, a faith demonstrated by resultant works and fruit.

However, the writer appears confident that this does not apply to his readership, commending their response to the faith and assuring them that God's response to them will be faithful and just.

Through the example of the promises that God had made to Abraham, which he subsequently kept of course, promises that he swore by his own name, the author clearly states that the Christian hope is based on those same promises and that same God, who cannot lie or prove false in any way. Therefore, their hope and trust will not be in vain.

Finally, the author returns to the subject of Jesus as the true high priest being the anchor of all hope for he has passed behind the veil, not the one separating the most holy place in the earthly temple, but the one that opens up the way to God. The allusion is that those who believe in Jesus are then attached to him by a divine anchor chain, providing them a link directly into heaven.

<sup>1</sup> Therefore let us go on towards perfection, leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ, and not laying again the foundation: repentance from dead works and faith towards God, <sup>2</sup> instruction about baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgement.

<sup>3</sup> And we will do this, if God permits.

## Hebrews 6:1-3

Foundational teaching about Christ refers to the basic elements commented on in Hebrews 5:12. Three paired examples of doctrine are given:

1. Christian conversion through repentance, i.e. turning away from dead works that cannot save and through faith towards God. The writer again comments on dead works in: *<<For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!>>* (Hebrews 9:13-14).
2. Baptisms is the plural of Greek *baptismos* and may refer to teaching about the differences between Jewish purification rites and Christian baptism, thus some translations use the word washings; and the laying on of hands, which could refer to an initiatory rite at the time of baptism: *<<Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit>>* (Acts 8:14-17), or to other hand-laying practices during prayers for healing and during commissioning of individuals for ministry: *<<While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off>>* (Acts 13:2-3).
3. The believers' future hope of resurrection and the eternal judgment upon all people: *<<Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt>>* (Daniel 12:2), *<<And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgement, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him>>* (Hebrews 9:27-28), and: *<<He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead – and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back>>* (Hebrews 11:19).

Go on towards perfection. This is a statement of encouragement for all disciples to endure in their faith, keeping their eyes fixed on the reason why they were called to Christ in the first place. Paul had his mind focused on this: *<<Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus>>* (Philippians 3:12-14).

Dead works can refer to the rituals of paganism, the worshipping of idols, which can also mean the lifestyle choices that even believers choose to make in terms of worldly pursuits. In Hebrews it also refers to the temple rituals that so many

Jewish Christians believed they should maintain, not realising the true freedom they had received when coming to faith in Jesus. The continuation of Jewish practice formed much of the basis of the false teaching that plagued and disrupted the work of the early church. Today it could be the type of false teaching that says 'as long as you go to church on a Sunday you can do what you like the rest of the time', or 'times have changed and everyone is doing this or that'.

**All of the elements, and more besides, were the basics of the faith and should have been known and accepted by all who have come to faith. It then becomes time to move on to a higher level of understanding what it means to have Jesus as a personal Lord and Saviour. It is unlikely that any true believer would learn the basics and then forget them; it seems more likely they were never truly learned and were certainly not accepted in the first place!**

The writer to the Hebrews had no intention of going back over basics in this letter but would leave that to the local church to deal with, which is as it should be for new converts, and indeed for many of those who have been in church for a long time.

### Hebrews 6:4-8 - Introduction

This passage has been subject to substantially different interpretations. The central debate concerns whether the descriptions of vv.4-5, e.g. 'enlightened', 'tasted the heavenly gift', 'shared in the Holy Spirit', and 'tasted of the goodness of the Word of God', depict people who were once true Christians.

1. Some argue these phrases do describe true Christians, implying that Christians can 'fall away' and lose their salvation, however, the comments made on Hebrews 3:14 indicate a fundamental difficulty with this view. Nevertheless, most who advocate this view hold that some who backslide can still return to Christian faith, thus limiting vv.4-6 to hardened cases of apostasy in which it is 'impossible ... to restore them again to repentance'.
2. Most commentators and scholars argue, however, that although these people may have participated fully in the Christian covenantal community, where they experienced enlightened instruction in the Word of God, where they saw public repentance occur, and where the Holy Spirit was at work in powerful ways, when such people do 'fall away' it is clear that they were never true believers because they have not made a true, saving response to the Gospel that would result in genuine faith, love, and perseverance (vv.9-12). Significantly, they were like land that received much rain but bore no good fruit, only 'thorns and thistles' (v.8). They may have participated outwardly in the Christian community and they even may have shared in the blessings of Christian fellowship; but, like the seed that fell on rocky ground in the parable of the sower, 'they have no root' (Mark 4:17), and subsequently they 'fall away' when faced with persecution, or even when called to give something back into the community.
3. Another view is that the warnings are addressed to true believers, and although they will never completely fall away, the warnings are still the means that God uses to challenge them to persevere in their faith, so as to preserve those whom the Lord has chosen.
4. A further view is that the 'falling away' described in v.6 has to do with loss of heavenly rewards. In any case, although the author recognises that

there may be a few in the congregation who fit the description of vv.4-8, in general he does not think it to be true of the whole congregation to which he is writing, for he says: <<***we are confident of better things in your case, things that belong to salvation***>> (v.9).

<sup>4</sup> For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit,

#### Hebrews 6:4

For explains ‘if God permits’ (v.3); in some cases it is fruitless to expound the deeper truths of the faith, or even lay again a foundation of elementary doctrines (v.1), since it is impossible to restore some people again to repentance: <<***See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled. See to it that no one becomes like Esau, an immoral and godless person, who sold his birthright for a single meal. You know that later, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, even though he sought the blessing with tears***>> (Hebrews 12:15-17). This likely refers to people who in the past may have participated in acts of public repentance, which were common in early Christian worship. Here, however, they have apparently ‘fallen away’ in such a decisive and irrevocable manner that: <<***they are crucifying again the Son of God and are holding him up to contempt***>> (v.6).

Although the writer is speaking from a clear understanding of what people are likely to do in terms of their faith, the reader also needs to keep in mind the concept of God’s grace that can overcome all human traits and actions. However, Paul acknowledges that even grace is dependent on faith, in some circumstances at least: <<***For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God***>> (Ephesians 2:8).

Having committed such deliberate apostasy, it is impossible, at least from a human perspective, to restore such a person again to repentance. While Christians understand these verses differently, it is wise pastoral advice to encourage a person who worries that he may have committed such a deep sin, that the very desire to repent and to be restored into fellowship with the Christian community is evidence that he has not ‘fallen away’ in the permanent, irrevocable way described in this verse. Refer to comments made on ‘blasphemy against the Holy Spirit’ in Matthew 12:31-32 and Luke 12:10 that are available on the website.

Enlightened. Being listed first, this likely describes the initial entrance into Christian community through explanation of the Christian faith: <<***But recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings***>> (Hebrews 10:32). This is an indication that a person has come to recognise and accept the truth about God, the world, their own self and their neighbour; they have come to see the light, or as the apostle puts it: <<***But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God***>> (John 3:21). Some have suggested that this may also have included baptism.

It is not just those who come to faith that have their eyes opened in such enlightenment, for some will know the ways of God and yet still go their own way. Satan certainly knows the truth as did the prophet Balaam, who came to see clearly: <<*Balaam looked up and saw Israel camping tribe by tribe. Then the spirit of God came upon him, and he uttered his oracle, saying: 'The oracle of Balaam son of Beor, the oracle of the man whose eye is clear'*>> (Numbers 24:2-3). He died because of his heresy along with the other pagans in the battle for the land inheritance allotted to the tribe of Reuben: <<*Along with the rest of those they put to death, the Israelites also put to the sword Balaam son of Beor, who practised divination*>> (Joshua 13:22).

Tasted the heavenly gift probably refers either to the Lord's Supper or the general blessing that one encounters in the fellowship of the Christian community, or both. It is an experience of a new type of life and love that just reaches out to embrace the new, or indeed existing believer; knowing that it comes to them directly from their heavenly Father.

And have shared in the Holy Spirit, literally 'have become a partaker of', the Holy Spirit. Some understand this as a reference to a person who has experienced the laying on of hands in the Christian community (v.2); others link it to the communal experience of the Spirit active in their midst producing fellowship and powerful signs. Whichever way one may view it, it is a revelation of truth, an awakening and assurance of the truth of God that comes with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Although the author does not refer to the law specifically, he is clearly indicating that salvation is by hearing and accepting the Gospel, not what anyone has earned by adhering to the law, supported explicitly by Paul: <<*The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard?*>> (Galatians 3:2). The same applies to the modern church who need to hear the Word and respond to it alone through faith, then demonstrated through their resultant good works.

This should not be taken to mean that a person receives a proportion of the Holy Spirit, for one of the mysteries of God is that the Holy Spirit can dwell completely and fully in each and every believer concurrently, and can still perform all the other works that go on continuously. This is the meaning of omnipresence and applies equally to the Spirit as it does to the Father, for both are fully and equally God.

<sup>5</sup> and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come,

#### Hebrews 6:5

Tasted the goodness of the Word of God. The psalmist wrote: <<*O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him*>> (Psalm 34:8). These people have heard the truth explained and thus have also learned of God's creative Word: <<*He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high*>> (Hebrews 1:3), and: <<*By faith we understand that the worlds were*

*prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible*>> (Hebrews 11:3). This can come through reading the bible, other books providing explanations on what was written by those who were inspired by God to pen what is now called Scripture, or to hear the Word spoken in a gathering. It is all about the revelation of the Gospel truth.

This Word will be fully exhibited in powers that bring about the world's renewal in the age to come: <<*Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels*>> (Hebrews 2:5), and: <<*For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come*>> (Hebrews 13:14), yet, through the present ministry of the Spirit, these powers are partially experienced now in the Christian community: <<*while God added his testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will*>> (Hebrews 2:4). The newness that a person feels when they come to saving faith is a partial revelation of how life will be when Jesus returns. It is also knowing that, for those who grow in the faith, they will be ready to embrace and fully participate in this new age when it does arrive; it is all about allowing the Holy Spirit to do the work of preparation for a new and better life.

<sup>6</sup> and then have fallen away, since on their own they are crucifying again the Son of God and are holding him up to contempt.

### Hebrews 6:6

To have fallen away involves a sustained, committed rejection of Christ and a departure from the Christian community: <<*They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us*>> (1 John 2:19). To restore them again to repentance means to bring them once again to a place within their own heart and soul where they know they can truthfully repent of their sins, including that which caused them to backslide. This wording alone does not specify whether the earlier repentance was merely outward: <<*And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, "I repent", you must forgive*>> (Luke 17:4), or whether it was a genuine, heartfelt repentance that accompanied true saving faith. The author is speaking in terms of what can be known from observing a person's behaviour. Although Christians in general and leaders in particular are called to show good judgement, they are not supposed to act as the judge: <<*Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven*>> (Luke 6:37).

The apostle offers advice to his readers: <<*For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than, after knowing it, to turn back from the holy commandment that was passed on to them*>> (2 Peter 2:21), while another apostle suggests the church's response to such people: <<*If you see your brother or sister committing what is not a mortal sin, you will ask, and God will give life to such a one – to those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin that is mortal; I do not say that you should pray about that*>> (1 John 5:16).

Crucifying again graphically portrays rejection of Jesus and the public disgrace they are placing him under through their rejection of him.

Holding him up to contempt, Greek *paradeigmatizō*, conveys the idea of a public, shameful display. The warning of vv.4-8 is substantial; such a falling away treats the Son of God with such serious rejection that it is as if the person wanted to put Christ back on the Cross. After such a dramatic departure it appears unlikely that such people would, or indeed could, ever return to saving faith.

The writer raises an interesting theological point here. Can someone come to true saving faith and then lose it, or more accurately, willingly give it up to return to a world that typically opposes God? He doesn't pursue the point but goes on in v.9 to say that he doesn't think it applies to his initial readership. Paul, in Romans Chapters 5-8 is quite clear that true believers cannot give up or lose their salvation; those who do were never truly saved to begin with. They may have accepted it superficially, said the right things, undergone baptism and served in the community in all sorts of ways, but they never took hold of their faith in Jesus and made it their own within their very soul.

<sup>7</sup> Ground that drinks up the rain falling on it repeatedly, and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. <sup>8</sup> But if it produces thorns and thistles, it is worthless and on the verge of being cursed; its end is to be burned over.

### Hebrews 6:7-8

Ground that drinks up the rain. Drawing on a common agricultural metaphor used in both the OT and NT alike: <<*They do not say in their hearts, 'Let us fear the Lord our God, who gives the rain in its season, the autumn rain and the spring rain, and keeps for us the weeks appointed for the harvest'*>> (Jeremiah 5:24), and: <<*His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire*>> (Luke 3:17), as well as the Kingdom parables in Matthew 13:24-30 and 13:36-43, the author warns that those who fall away are like land that does not produce a crop that is useful, but only bears thorns and thistles.

In a picture of impending final judgment and condemnation, the author says that such land is on the verge of being cursed, an allusion no doubt to the punishment for original sin: <<*And to the man he said, 'Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, "You shall not eat of it", cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field*>> (Genesis 3:17-18), and its end is to be burned, as later revealed by Jesus to John: <<*The first angel blew his trumpet, and there came hail and fire, mixed with blood, and they were hurled to the earth; and a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all green grass was burned up. The second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea*>> (Revelation 8:7-8).

God had warned through his prophet of the land becoming thorns and thistles, which are to be burned: <<*I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it*>> (Isaiah 5:6), and: <<*I have no wrath*.

*If it gives me thorns and briers, I will march to battle against it. I will burn it up>> (Isaiah 27:4).*

Its end is to be burned is also the fate of those who do not remain attached to Christ by faith: <<*Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned*>> (John 15:6).

With regard to those who never truly came to faith, other than a superficial proclamation of faith, Tom Wright suggests: ‘We should not press the writer for answers to questions he wasn’t asking. We should, rather, let him pose his sharp and uncomfortable question directly to us. Are we - or are some within our Christian fellowship - in danger of turning our backs on the faith, and joining in the general tendency to sneer at the Gospel and the church? Are we lining up with those who hold firm to their original faith and hope, or with those who, like Peter by the charcoal fire, are ready to deny that they have anything to do with Jesus?’

<sup>9</sup> Even though we speak in this way, beloved, we are confident of better things in your case, things that belong to salvation.

#### Hebrews 6:9

Following the dire warning of vv.4-8, the author expresses confidence in the salvation of his beloved audience: <<*But recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting*>> (Hebrews 10:32-34).

Although he warns that some may fall away, he thinks that, generally speaking, his readers will not do this, for they have better things than those described in vv.4-6; in fact, their lives give evidence of genuine spiritual renewal, for they have things that belong to salvation.

<sup>10</sup> For God is not unjust; he will not overlook your work and the love that you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do.

#### Hebrews 6:10

Evidence is given for the author’s confidence in the salvation of his readers, as recently noted in Hebrews 10:32-34, including the good fruit of their service, i.e. their work, and the love of the saints: <<*Therefore, brothers and sisters, holy partners in a heavenly calling, consider that Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession*>> (Hebrews 3:1), and: <<*Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those from Italy send you greetings*>> (Hebrews 13:24).

Paul too points to the work of the Thessalonian church in his first letter to them: <<*We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ*>>

(1 Thessalonians 1:2-3). This provides insight to the unified thinking of the early church leaders on the issue of good works being a response to saving faith that result from God's grace alone. In his second letter he goes on to commend their perseverance despite the times of testing they had to face: <<Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring>> (2 Thessalonians 1:4). This is a theme that was first addressed by the Lord's brother to his Jewish-Christian readers: <<My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing>> (James 1:2-4).

<sup>11</sup> And we want each one of you to show the same diligence, so as to realise the full assurance of hope to the very end, <sup>12</sup> so that you may not become sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

### Hebrews 6:11-12

We want each one of you to show the same diligence. The preceding verses have shown that the early readership had started well on their journey of faith. The author is now instructing them that, good though what they have done may be, and indeed God will honour them for it, they are required to keep going and are not to slacken off the pace, if they are to realise the full assurance of hope.

The purpose of the warning (vv.4-8), indeed of the whole letter, is to encourage earnest perseverance to the very end. This demands hope, which is closely allied with faith: <<Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen>> (Hebrews 11:1), and enduring patience (v.15).

This is not suggesting that salvation is by works, after all grace is grace and it can only be received because God chooses to bestow it; it cannot be earned through good works or by trying to impress God in some way. However, the reality of the free gift of grace and the salvation it offers to those who respond should have a natural outworking for a desire to give something back to the community, whether inside or outside of the church. The normal Christian life is one of energy, enthusiasm, faithful effort and patient hard work.

Sluggish here is the same word translated as dull in Hebrews 5:11 in the phrase 'dull in understanding'. The warning is for them to avoid being that way in their thinking and actions. It should be noted that the energy and drive for works comes from God through his Holy Spirit.

Imitators of those who inherit the promises. Abraham is the immediate example in vv.13-15; other examples of OT saints are found throughout Hebrews Chapter 11, and Hebrews 13:7 provides a command to imitate and respect church leaders: <<Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith>>.

### II.c.iii Hebrews 6:13-20 - The certainty of God's promise

Abraham is shown to be an example of one who, through patience and faith, 'inherited the promises' (vv.13-15), as referred to in vv.11-12. God's promises are guaranteed by God's own perfectly trustworthy character (vv.16-18). Therefore the promise of salvation through Jesus' high priesthood is a secure and trustworthy hope (vv.19-20), and not a vain wish, and certainly not a crutch to lean on.

<sup>13</sup> When God made a promise to Abraham, because he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, <sup>14</sup> saying, 'I will surely bless you and multiply you.'

#### Hebrews 6:13-14

Promise to Abraham. God's promises to Abraham include those found in: <<Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed'>> (Genesis 12:1-3), and: <<The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, 'By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice'>> (Genesis 22:15-18). Refer also to Genesis 17:1-22.

Here the author focuses on the blessing God promised to Abraham and his offspring in Genesis 22:16-17, which is partially quoted in v.14, concerning which God – since there is no one greater who could assure his promises – pledged by oath upon his own character.

I will surely bless you is literally 'If I don't surely bless you ...', implying that God is saying that if my blessings do not come to fruition then I am not the God I claim to be. It is given as confirmation that God can be relied upon to keep his promises.

<sup>15</sup> And thus Abraham, having patiently endured, obtained the promise.

#### Hebrews 6:15

Having patiently endured. Abraham waited 25 years for the birth of Isaac, a fact obtained by comparing: <<So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran>> (Genesis 12:4), with: <<Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him>> (Genesis 21:5). He did not witness the fulfilled promise of innumerable offspring in his lifetime, which will be fully discussed in comments made on Hebrews 11:13. His patience in faithful waiting is to be imitated (v.12). Refer also to Hebrews 11:8-19.

In his lifetime, Abraham obtained the promise through seeing Isaac born, and through the ram offered on Isaac's behalf; refer to Genesis Chapter 22 for the

account of Isaac being offered as a sacrifice to God. But now there is even greater fulfilment for Abraham, through the fact that Abraham's spiritual and biological descendants are indeed too many to count.

The promise was also realised through the offspring of Abraham, although it would later become realised that it was not for all physical descendants of Abraham but for those who would become his spiritual descendants by accepting Christ as Saviour. Therefore, many Jews became excluded and many Gentiles included in the fulfilment of the promise: *<<For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us)>> (Romans 4:16).*

<sup>16</sup> Human beings, of course, swear by someone greater than themselves, and an oath given as confirmation puts an end to all dispute.

### Hebrews 6:16

Oaths were common legal devices in ancient times just as in the modern world and dispute here implies a legal context. An example of it used in the OT shows how it should be brought into the presence of the Lord for ratification: *<<When someone delivers to another a donkey, ox, sheep, or any other animal for safekeeping, and it dies or is injured or is carried off, without anyone seeing it, an oath before the Lord shall decide between the two of them that the one has not laid hands on the property of the other; the owner shall accept the oath, and no restitution shall be made>> (Exodus 22:10-11).*

Oaths usually required appeal to some greater authority, often a deity, i.e. swear by someone greater than themselves, thus God swore by himself, the highest authority and only true deity; there is no one greater.

Jesus had taught against the use of oaths as they often brought the name of God into disrepute. Instead, he simply requires a person to be truthful in all they say and do: *<<But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be "Yes, Yes" or "No, No"; anything more than this comes from the evil one>> (Matthew 5:34-37).*

<sup>17</sup> In the same way, when God desired to show even more clearly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it by an oath, <sup>18</sup> so that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God would prove false, we who have taken refuge might be strongly encouraged to seize the hope set before us.

### Hebrews 6:17-18

The two unchangeable things are God's promise/purpose and his oath. The character of God is holy, and he can never prove false if he is truly to be God. Thus his announcement of his promise is sure, and doubly sure when combined with his

oath. This encourages one to seize the hope: <<Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful>> (Hebrews 10:23), of God's promises that are encapsulated in Jesus: <<For in him every one of God's promises is a 'Yes.' For this reason it is through him that we say the 'Amen', to the glory of God>> (2 Corinthians 1:20).

It is impossible that God would prove false. Because of his holy nature, character and person, it is impossible for God to lie about anything or fail to prove true in all that he says and does. This, too, was recognised by Paul as a fundamental aspect of God: <<Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and the knowledge of the truth that is in accordance with godliness, in the hope of eternal life that God, who never lies, promised before the ages began – in due time he revealed his word through the proclamation with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Saviour>> (Titus 1:1-3).

<sup>19</sup> We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, <sup>20</sup> where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest for ever according to the order of Melchizedek.

### Hebrews 6:19-20

The Christian hope is in the person and saving work of Christ, pictured here as the high priest who mediates between God and his people.

Anchor was a common ancient metaphor for stability; hope provides security and stability of the soul. Clearly, even though the author warns the readers concerning apostasy (vv.4-8), he believes they can have assurance of their salvation.

The term anchor appears only here and in Acts Chapter 27, where Paul's ship is being driven uncontrollably along in a storm towards destruction on Malta despite the availability of several anchors. Yet the Christian faith has always considered Jesus to be their anchor, secured to the rock of ages. This is because he has appeared behind, not the curtain in the earthly temple but in the very courts of heaven, i.e. the inner shrine behind the curtain, where he dwells in the presence of God. Those who believe in him are attached to him by the anchor chain and therefore are connected into the presence of God.

Christian hope isn't optimism, a vague sense that things will probably turn out all right. Christian faith is trusting, and continuing to trust through thick and thin, in the God who made unbreakable promises and will certainly keep them. Christian hope is looking ahead to the time when, according to those promises, God will make the world over anew, completing the work he began in Jesus. And it's Jesus on whom the whole thing rests. That's why Christians tell the story of Jesus over and over again, day by day. Holding on to that story is like making sure the anchor's cable is firmly attached at the human end. But the point of it all is that the anchor itself is secure and solid.

The curtain, Greek *katapetasma*, is the veil in the tabernacle or temple separating the inner place, i.e. 'Most Holy Place', from the rest of the tabernacle

or temple: <<*Behind the second curtain was a tent called the Holy of Holies*>> (Hebrews 9:3).

The curtain was made according to the instructions of God: <<*You shall make a curtain of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen; it shall be made with cherubim skilfully worked into it*>> (Exodus 26:31), and was the domain of the priests only: <<*But you and your sons with you shall diligently perform your priestly duties in all that concerns the altar and the area behind the curtain. I give your priesthood as a gift; any outsider who approaches shall be put to death*>> (Numbers 18:7); in particular, only the high priest could enter behind the curtain and he only once per year on the Day of Atonement. Even Aaron was not permitted to come before God in this place at a time of his own choosing: <<*The Lord said to Moses: Tell your brother Aaron not to come just at any time into the sanctuary inside the curtain before the mercy-seat that is upon the ark, or he will die; for I appear in the cloud upon the mercy-seat*>> (Leviticus 16:2). Although it was considered by the Jews to be the most sacred place on earth because a man could be closest to God in that place, it became obsolete with the death of Jesus: <<*At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split*>> (Matthew 27:51), because: <<*by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh)*>> (Hebrews 10:20).

Forerunner. Jesus, who went beforehand and opened the veil, now permits others to draw near: <<*By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the sanctuary has not yet been disclosed as long as the first tent is still standing*>> (Hebrews 9:8), and again: <<*Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh)*>> (Hebrews 10:19-20).

The author now returns to the subject that he introduced in Hebrews 5:5-10, that of Jesus being the perfect and perpetual high priest of God, designated to act as mediator between the Father and his sinful people, ordained by his own blood.