

When God's Promises Seem to Fail

Rich Nathan

July 6 & 7, 2019

Hebrews 6:13-7:25

Marlene and I had the opportunity to lead the national conferences for the Vineyard churches in the south and the north of Brazil in the past several weeks. So, we spent two weeks in Brazil, teaching and meeting with their pastors and missionaries. I gave 14 talks there. It really was a wonderful time seeing Vineyard take root in South America.

One of the most exciting things was how young many of the leaders and pastors are. The movement there is not the movement of aging Baby Boomers, but the movement of Millennials and Gen Z. I don't know when I've been more enthusiastic about Vineyard in another country. It was really a great time.

Over the summer for those of you who may be new here or have been away because of vacation, we have been teaching through the book of Hebrews, one of the most wonderful books in the New Testament. Let me begin by asking you a question: have you ever been in a situation where you doubted God's faithfulness? If you've been in a relationship with God for more than a few months, you've almost certainly have experienced something which caused you to ask the question – God, are you really there for me? God, can I really count on you?

Maybe you have prayed and prayed for something to happen that didn't happen – a breakthrough in your marriage, a redirection for the life of your children, a healing, a job, a financial turnaround, a partner to spend your life with, something – and you haven't seen God answer your prayers. At least, not up to this point.

Or maybe something really painful has happened to you. Something that completely threw you for a loop – the death of a loved one, a romantic breakup, a betrayal, a bankruptcy, or something awful has happened to someone you care about or someone you've read about and you're left wondering – God, are you there? What does faith mean? Not just abstractly, but at this moment, what do I really believe? God, are you really Lord of this messed up world? Do you really answer prayer? Can I rely on you?

The issue of God's faithfulness and reliability has relevance not only for our lives right now, but the even bigger issue of our eternal salvation. Let's say you're a person that's considering whether or not to become a follower of Jesus. You've heard the message that God loves you. In fact, God loves you so much that he sent his one and only Son to die on a cross as a substitute to pay for your sins. The good news of the gospel is that if you simply put your trust in Jesus and all that he has done for you by dying in your place, giving himself up for you and rising from the dead, God will forgive all of your sins. He

will bring you into a relationship with himself. To find God, you simply surrender yourself to his Son, Jesus.

But you may ask, if I take this step, if I ask God to forgive me and I surrender control of my life to Jesus and make a choice to become one of his followers, what then? How do I know between now and the day I die that I'll keep following Jesus, that I will persist in faith, and that God will ultimately save me? I mean, let's be honest, we all know ourselves! We know that we blow hot and cold. There's lots of things that we've failed at before – maybe a marriage or an important relationship or a job, or school. We all have the experience of being excited about something for a while. Then we lost interest or we gave up.

How do we know if we embrace Jesus that we'll continue to embrace Jesus next year? The next 10 years? The next 20 years? When we're old? When we're disappointed? When life makes no sense? When we're tempted? Can we really rely on God to take hold of us and never let go until the day we die and then beyond that day through all eternity.

We've been doing a series this summer from the New Testament book of Hebrews called "Never Give Up".

In the passage we're going to look at today, the author gives one particular reason why some people are tempted to walk away from Jesus and go back to their old way of life. I called today's talk "When God's Promises Seem to Fail".

Let's pray.

Before I pray, I do want to encourage you all this summer to be faithful in giving to the church. You know, virtually every church in America struggles the summer season financially because people are away. Lots of people are on vacation. Attendance dips. And when folks are away, they tend to forget about giving. Giving to the church is not like your mortgage or your electric bill or your cell phone bill. Bills come whether you are on vacation or not – you better pay or banks and companies will come after you. But it's not like that with church. Giving to church is entirely voluntary.

Brothers and sisters, may I ask you to make a commitment to give to Vineyard Columbus over the summer even if you're away. If you haven't gone online and set up online giving on a schedule, please do so. If you have the funds to write an extra check, would you do that? But please don't neglect your giving during the summer months.

We read:

Slide Hebrews 6:13-20

¹³ When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, ¹⁴ saying, “I will surely bless you and give you many descendants.” ¹⁵ And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised.

¹⁶ People swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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 set before us may be greatly encouraged. ¹⁹ We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, ²⁰ where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.

Now this tests follows a passage in Hebrews that we looked at last week which might create insecurity in the readers, we read this in Hebrews 6:4-6.

Slide Hebrews 6:4-6

⁴ It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵ who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age ⁶ and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

But the writer immediately follows that passage with one that gives great assurance that those of us who have surrendered our lives to Jesus, those of us who have given ourselves to his self-giving love. The text we are looking at today assures us that we’ll continue on despite everything thrown in our way. God’s promises never fail.

Hebrews 6:13-20 is an exposition of a story of the life of Abraham. It’s drawn from the Old Testament book of Genesis. The author is saying that if Abraham could keep believing, if Abraham could stay on this journey of faith despite all that he went through, then whoever you are, you can keep believing despite everything that you’ve been through or anything you will go through.

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God’s dealing with Abraham

Many of you know the story. God called Abraham who was 75 years old to leave his family and his homeland in what is now modern day Iraq and journey to the Promised Land of Israel. God promised to give Abraham and his wife, Sarah, a son. So Abraham obeyed God’s call and he journeyed to the Promised Land. There, he waited 25 years for God to fulfill his promises. Do you think Abraham ever wondered if God’s promises had failed? Do you think Abraham ever struggled with God’s faithfulness? Faith in God is not easy in this fallen world.

It's not like you make a choice to believe and you never struggle with doubt again. There may be people like that. I'm certainly not one of those folks! For me and for many people, faith is a fight. Faith is a struggle. Faith is a battle. It's not easy to continue to trust God when everything you prayed for, everything you hoped for, has not happened.

Abraham was 100 years old and his wife, Sarah, was 90 when God fulfilled his promises. Can you imagine God speaking and saying, "You old people – with one foot in the grave – you're going to have a son, Isaac"? And then Isaac was miraculously born.

But when Isaac grew up, Abraham was commanded to sacrifice his long-awaited son, Isaac, to God. Again, do you think that Abraham struggled with faith? Do you think he wondered if God's promise of multiplying his descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore, had utterly failed?

Hebrews tells us that God gave Abraham – and through Abraham, God gave us – three things to bolster our faith. When all outward signs point to God's unreliability, God could have left Abraham and us with his bare word alone. He could have simply said, "Trust me." But God in his merciful, self-giving love strengthens us with three additional encouragements to help our faith along the way.

The first thing God gave to Abraham was an oath.

Slide

An oath

Here's what we read:

Slide Hebrews 6:13, 14, 16, 17

¹³ When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, ¹⁴ saying, "I will surely bless you and give you many descendants."

¹⁶ People swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. ¹⁷ 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.

Here's the idea. People take oaths to guarantee promises. They say, "I swear to God." Or "I swear on my children." Or "I swear on my mother's grave." In ancient Israel, they used to say, "As the Lord lives, I will do this." In more recent centuries, people would put their hand on the Bible and say, "I swear by the Holy Bible." The idea is that you don't need to just count on me, but on something more sacred than me.

God wanted Abraham and his heirs – namely us – to absolutely have no doubt that he would keep his promises to bless us. He wanted us to trust his promises. So he secured his promises with our oath. The problem was that there was no greater authority than himself, no one truer than himself to swear by. So, God swore by himself. God gave us a double guarantee – a promise and an oath based upon his own character – that if we surrender control of our lives to Jesus Christ, we will persevere in faith until the day of our deaths and beyond. And to shore up our struggling faith, God not only gives us an oath, but a hope.

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A hope

Slide Hebrews 6:18

¹⁸ 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 set before us may be greatly encouraged.

You need to understand what hope is in the Bible. Hope is not a feeling addressed to our emotions. Hope is a decision addressed to our wills. Hope is a decision to believe God for a good future, whatever is going on in the present. Hope says I have a future. Hope says blessing is going to come to me. Hope says what God started, he will complete. And what God promised, he will fulfill.

It's interesting that the author of Hebrews calls hope a "firm hope" and a "secure hope" in verse 19.

Slide Hebrews 6:19

¹⁹ We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain,

Hope in the New Testament is the opposite of what we mean when we say today, I "hope" something will happen. I hope I get this job. I hope my health will improve. I hope I passed the test. When we use the word hope, we mean something that's less than certain. When we use the word hope, we mean a wish, a fond desire. A hope in the New Testament is a confident expectation. It is what will get you through disappointments and pain and grief and enable you to keep on believing. It's not a fond hope. It's not a false hope. It's not an unrealistic hope. What will get you through is a firm hope, a secure hope. The world is full of false hopes.

Immature religion nurtures false hope. The reason that I've been so strong about this church not buying into prosperity gospel messages that are everywhere on Christian television is because these prosperity messages nurture false hope, fake hope. It is immature religion. If you have enough faith, you and your loved ones will be healed

100% of the time. If you have enough faith, and believe hard enough you will financially prosper all of the time. If you are a good person, you will not suffer; God will protect you from all tragedies and all pain.

Immature religion always nurtures false hopes, unrealistic hopes. To the extent that you have a mental checklist of God's promises that's inaccurate, to that extent you are going to experience disastrous consequences regarding your faith. Because if you believe, for example, that God has promised you a happy marriage and you don't have a happy marriage because either you're single or you're married, but unhappy, to that extent, your faith will be shattered. Perhaps you'll throw in the towel, not just on marriage, but on God and faith. You'll believe God just didn't keep his promise to you.

Brothers and sisters, there is so much fake hope, false hope, right now. And that fake or false hope is causing people to give up on Christian faith. People keep putting their hope in politics and politicians and their promises. We know what's going to happen there – those hopes will be dashed. Politics and politicians cannot offer us a firm hope, a secure hope. So how do you get a firm hope at a time when we're tempted to give up?

The author says to strengthen our faith when we're tempted to give up, God gives us

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An oath

A hope

Slide

An anchor

Read with me:

Slide Hebrews 6:19-20

¹⁹ We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, ²⁰ where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.

The author uses a really graphic illustration here. Ships are moored to the shore or a harbor by a huge chain with an anchor fixed to an immovable object. So, he says, "I want you to imagine a ship named "Christian" and you're being rocked back and forth on the seas of life. What will keep you from capsizing or from being washed out to sea? There's a chain that goes upward. We can't see the other end except by faith. At the end of that chain is an anchor that goes right into Heaven. How do we know where it's anchored? Because Jesus carried the anchor right into the Holy of Holies in Heaven. We know where Jesus is. He's at the right hand of God. We know where that anchor is. It's

hooked around the throne of God in Heaven. Will that anchor ever be moved? No. Never!

The author says that God's promises will never fail. Can we trust God's faithfulness even if at the moment our prayers have gone unanswered and our hearts are broken? The writer of Hebrews says, "Absolutely, yes! Look at the way God dealt with Abraham – he gave him an oath. He gave him a hope. He gave him an anchor. And look at the way God dealt with the priesthood."

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God's dealing with the priesthood

Slide Hebrews 7: 11-16

¹¹ If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood—and indeed the law given to the people established that priesthood—why was there still need for another priest to come, one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? ¹² For when the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also. ¹³ He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. ¹⁴ For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. ¹⁵ And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears, ¹⁶ one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life.

To understand the complex arguments that the author of Hebrews is presenting in Hebrews 7, we first must grasp the failure of the Old Testament priesthood.

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The failure of the Old Testament priesthood

So, let me help you to get into the mindset of the recipients of the letter to the Hebrews for a moment. Why were these first century Jewish believers in Jesus tempted to doubt God's promises and his faithfulness? One big reason, and this applied not just to Jewish believers in Jesus but to many faithful Jews living before the time of Jesus in the first century, many faithful Jews doubted God's faithfulness and wondered what was going on, how were things going to work out because of the Old Testament priesthood that God had established. The priesthood was designed to represent God to his people and represent people to God. The priesthood was a body of men that served as a bridge between people and God. But it utterly failed. The bridge had totally collapsed.

If you look at Old Testament history, here's what you'll see.

Abraham had a great-grandson named Levi. Levi had a descendant named Aaron who was the brother of Moses. God promised that Aaron's descendants would be the priest. They would be the bridge over which people came to God. And the bridge over which God came to people. What happened to this priesthood promised to Aaron? Aaron had four sons – Nadab, Abihu, Ithamar and Eleazar.

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Chart

Aaron's first two sons, Nadab and Abihu, were killed because they attempted to approach the Holy of Holies with unholy fire. We don't exactly know how these two sons of Aaron violated God's law. The fact that the next passage in Leviticus 10 warns about priests drinking wine may indicate that perhaps these two sons of Aaron got intoxicated and thought they could go into the presence of God completely drunk. In any case, Aaron's first two sons, Nadab and Abihu, were killed.

The priesthood passed to the next son, Ithamar. If you look at Ithamar's descendants, we find in 1 Samuel the name of a priest named Eli. He had two awful sons, Phinehas and Hophni. These two priests sexually abused women. Priests sexually abusing people is not a modern phenomenon. We saw it 3,000 years ago. Eli refuses to restrain his sons. God finally brings judgment. God ended the line of the priesthood through Ithamar.

So, there is only one priestly line left through Aaron's fourth son, Eleazar. Everything seems to be going well for a long period of time, but then a couple of centuries before Jesus, this line of Eleazar ended when a Greek King named Antiochus I appointed another priest outside of this line. Many Jews rejected that government-created priesthood. The whole community grew up out in the desert called the Qumran community. They said the priesthood was illegitimate. The whole temple system was corrupt. And we know what happened with those government-sanctioned priests. They became the Sadducees who helped put Jesus to death.

All of this is to say that to many Jews in the first century, it seemed like all was lost. The priesthood bridge that God had built between himself and his people had collapsed. God's way of people coming to him and him coming to people seemed to have failed. How can we keep relying on God when the way that God set things up has totally fallen to the ground. The author of Hebrews says that God always had in mind a better priesthood – than the one who came through Levi and Aaron. The author calls our attention to the model of Melchizedek.

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The model of Melchizedek

Just like the author did a deep meditation on the life of Abraham, he does a deep meditation on the figure of Melchizedek from Genesis 14 and Psalm 110. I'm going to close with a few reflections on what was so great about Melchizedek.

What was so great about Melchizedek? Let's read verse 1:

Slide Hebrews 7:1

This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High. He met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings and blessed him

First of all, Melchizedek was

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A king and a priest

The fact that Melchizedek was a king and a priest is really unusual. God in the Old Testament typically separated political authority and religious authority. They were kept in two totally different spheres. This did not mean that the king was free to do whatever he wanted apart from God's law. The king was always subject to God's law. In God's politics – the ruler is always subject to the law. The law is king.

In other ancient Near Eastern cultures, whatever the king said was law. But in ancient Israel, the prophets were appointed to call the king to account. Not to just support the king in whatever he did, but to call him to account and to get him to bow the knee to the law of God.

In the Old Testament it's really clear that God separates religious power from earthly political power. The Bible recognized that it is a toxic combination for human beings to have earthly political power – to command armies, to jail people and to also claim to speak in the name of the Lord. This was the problem of the medieval Pope, combining political power with religious power. This is the problem with the Ayatollahs today in Iran. Whenever politics and religion get mixed up too closely, things get really awful for people. God understands the corruption of men and women and so he makes a sharp distinction between politics on the one hand and religion on the other. In the Bible, there is only person who can ultimately be entrusted with the role of both priest and king and that is Jesus Christ, to whom Melchizedek pointed.

Only Jesus is free from the corruption of sin. Only Jesus is free from selfish ambition. Only Jesus always uses power to serve others and never to serve himself. Only Jesus – the one whose heart is full of mercy and kindness – is safe enough to be both King of Kings and a priest forever. God always had a plan for a better priesthood than the one he established through Levi and Aaron. That's the priesthood of Jesus Christ.

What God promised through the model of Melchizedek was

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A total system upgrade

I haven't the time to go through the very tight argument of Hebrews 7. In Old Testament thought that the writer of Hebrews calls our attention to, the Kingdom of God, covenants with people, the laws that he gave, the sacrifices and the priesthood that he established when we break the law, the tabernacle where he dwells, all of these things – kingship and covenant and law and sacrifice and priesthood and tabernacle – they are all interwoven with each other. The author of Hebrews argues in Hebrews 7 that when you upgrade one of those elements such as the priesthood, that immediately means that you have to upgrade all the other elements.

In Hebrews 7, he talks to us about an upgrade in the priesthood. In chapter 8, he talks about an upgrade of the covenant. In chapter 9, he talks about an upgrade of the tabernacle. In chapter 10, he talks about an upgrade of the sacrifices. The best illustration that I can give for what the author is arguing for from Hebrews 7-10, is he is arguing for a total system upgrade.

He says that what happened in Jesus Christ is a total system upgrade. We're not just talking about a little patch for those of you who are computer nerds. He's not just talking about a software update. What he's arguing for is a total system upgrade. We need all the hardware replaced. We're working with a new operating system, new software, new firmware. Jesus is not just a little tweak in the system, brothers and sisters. The coming of Jesus is a revolution. His kingdom and his priesthood change everything.

God always promised a better priesthood. And God's promises never fail. The model of Melchizedek was ultimately a signpost, a pointer to the person of Jesus.

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The person of Jesus

Here's what we read:

Slide Hebrews 7:24-25

²⁴ but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. ²⁵ Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

We ask how can we keep on in our faith when our prayers are unanswered, when our hearts are broken, when we see no breakthroughs? How do I persevere in faith when God's promises seem to fail? Here's what the author says:

Slide Hebrews 7:25

²⁵ Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

Brothers and sisters, that's the case. Our hope is not ultimately that we are able to keep going. It's not that we are great men and women of faith, mighty men of valor, that we are so full of integrity that we never give in to temptation. Our hope, our confidence is in the simple fact that he is able. The author calls our attention ultimately to Jesus. Jesus is able. Rely on him. Hook your life onto him. Trust in him.

Here's what we read:

Slide Hebrews 7:25

²⁵ Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

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He is able to save completely

That word "completely" means that he is able to save to the uttermost. There is no circumstance that could hit your life – no problem, no attack, no betrayal, no health problem or a loss or grief – that Jesus can't save you through. If all of your wildest fears came true, if whatever you dread actually happened to you, if the diagnosis turns out to be cancer, if your spouse leaves, if your child's life falls apart, if it's Alzheimer's, if all the prophecies from the scientists turn out to be true about climate change, if another epidemic more dreadful than AIDS or the Spanish Flu hits us, if all our wildest fears are realized, Jesus will still save us to the uttermost. And how does he save us to the uttermost?

Slide Hebrews 7:25

²⁵ Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

Brothers and sisters, when I consider all of my weaknesses and all of the weaknesses of this church and all the ways that the culture is working its way into our lives and the lives of our children, how can we still have hope and confidence as Christians? The writer says because Jesus is our holy and indestructible High Priest and is at this moment standing in heaven while I speak to you and you sit here listening, when we go to bed at night and we're driving in the car and we're watching TV and we're fighting

with each other, when things are unraveling in our life, Jesus Christ is standing in Heaven, praying for me and praying for you.

He's praying right now for this church and he's praying for the church in the city. He's praying for the church in this nation. He's praying for his people around the world. While we sit here, Jesus, our holy, indestructible priest, is standing and praying for us in Heaven. And the prayers of Jesus are always heard. They don't bounce off the ceiling. He's in the Holy of Holies. That's my hope. That's your hope for your children and your grandchildren when you see them drifting from God. That's our hope for our lives and for our world. Our hope is not just in our prayers, but in Jesus' prayers and his wonderful person. Let's pray.

CLOSING

Please stand. [Ministry Time]

I want to invite your Campus Pastor back up to continue this time of prayer and worship. Bless you all, and have a great week!

When God's Promises Seem to Fail

Rich Nathan
July 6 & 7, 2019
Hebrews 6:13-7:25

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