



HOPE SINKS

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We are already on our sixth installment in this series from the book of Hebrews. Next week, we'll mix things up a bit as my dad – the ORIGINAL Pastor Peabody -- brings message number 7. I can't tell you how glad I am to have the chance to let you all get to know him

Last week we looked at what the author of Hebrews had to say about rest, and this morning, I'd like to take a look at what he says about hope. We're going to drop in to the middle of chapter 6.

Hebrews 6:10-20

God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.

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

Men swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf.

St. Thomas, Ontario was founded in 1810. It quickly grew in importance in Canada's shipping business and earned the name of the "Railway Capital of Canada." Twenty six rail lines went through the city at one point. It was a robust, thriving center of commerce.

But that's not what the town is known for today. Now it is remembered as the place where Jumbo the Elephant died. The Barnum and Bailey circus attraction was crossing all those railroad tracks in 1885 when it was struck by an oncoming train.

Pretty soon, that event came to redefine the town. Today, there's a life-size statue of Jumbo there. Jumbo brand cigars were made in St. Thomas. A large mural of Jumbo and the circus was painted on a downtown wall. It's all still railroad related, but only as a caricature. The elephant may have been giant, but it shrunk the reputation of the town to something far less than it once was.

When we talk about hope, I think we have shrunk its reputation to something far less than it really is. What was once a grand idea is now something more like a caricature of itself.

We function on what I would call "anemic" hope – hope that is more wishful thinking than anything else. Listen to how we use it in a few sentences:

"I hope it doesn't rain."

"I hope they find a cure for cancer."

"I hope the Seahawks win."

"I hope this sermon isn't going to be very long."

They're all nice ideas, but we don't really put a lot of stock in them actually coming true. We generally use the word hope to describe wanting something when the chances aren't that good for actually getting it. Hope is kind of a flimsy optimism that doesn't have much to stand on. It's about possibility more than probability. We call it hope when we're holding out for the "it could happen" in the face of "it probably won't."

When I was on the speech team in college, we had to read Jesse Jackson's speech from the 1988 Democratic National Convention. It was a very well written, motivational, high energy speech. But it ended with him saying over and over again, "Keep hope alive! Keep hope alive! Keep hope alive!" You get this vision of hope passed out on the floor and somebody kneeling on top of it, doing chest compressions and trying to do CPR to revive it. It sounded like hope barely hanging on – hope depending on us rather than us depending on hope.

That's NOT the kind of hope Hebrews talks about. And what I'd like to do for us this morning is reshape the way we think about hope. Because there's much more to it than keeping a positive outlook or hanging on to a dream.

I am not a gambling man, but I would be willing to bet that you could not find a single worldview or faith that has hope closer to its core than Christianity. Think about it. Our most basic belief is that Jesus conquered death and evil and offers us the chance to share in his victory. That just oozes hope. Hope is what we're about.

In the Christian context, here's a good definition of hope:

The joyful, confident expectation of eternal salvation

I can't take credit for that definition, but I like it. I like it that it begins with the fact that our hope is joyful. It is! We celebrate the best possible news. I like it that this definition

talks about our hope being a confident expectation because it isn't wishy washy. We're counting on it. And I like the definition because it's specific. Our hope is not just a general good feeling, it's based on the fact that we're saved for eternity. We have a life that never ends.

But if we're honest with ourselves, that hope isn't on our radar most of the time. Unless we're on death's door or in a major crisis, most of us don't go through the day thinking much about life after death. We're pretty preoccupied with our daily existence. We treat hope of heaven like insurance. We're glad to know we've got it, but it doesn't need our attention on a regular basis. I'm happy death isn't the end, but how should hope of eternity affect my life?

But there's more to salvation than just life after death. I think the more we spend time with this hope, the more time we'll want to spend with it. Once again, the author of Hebrews helps expand our thinking. And once again, he reaches back into Israel's history to illustrate his points. This time he goes all the way back to Abraham, and we'll be looking at his story as we go along.

On more than one occasion, God made promises to Abraham, and looking at Abraham's hope in them more closely will help us better appreciate what Hebrews is saying.

From the very first time God called Abraham, He made him promises. He said he would make him into a great nation. He said he would give him a lot of land. He said he would turn him into a blessing for the rest of the world.

Pretty cool promises. Good reasons to have hope. But time went by, and it looked like Abraham and his wife weren't going to have any kids of their own. The great hope Abraham had of seeing those promises come true started to dwindle.

Genesis 15:1-6

After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision:

*"Do not be afraid, Abram.
I am your shield,
your very great reward."*

But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."

Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars — if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

Abraham was a realist. He had resigned himself to his situation. His estate would just go to his employee, Eliezer. But God says, “No. When I say heir, I’m talking about a physical heir. You’re going to have a kid of your own. In fact, you’re going to have so many descendants, you won’t even be able to count them.”

Here’s Abraham, assuming God has done all he can when God is just barely beginning to fulfill his promises. There is such a contrast between what we’re willing to settle for and what God intends for us. The truth is that **God’s hope is bigger than ours.**

The hope that God holds out for us is so much larger and more creative than what we come up with for ourselves. And yet, we consistently underestimate what he has in mind.

In his realistic, pragmatic approach, Abraham did everything we tend to do:

1. Cut out the wait time. God SAID he would give Abraham a son, but who knew when or if that would really happen? Eliezer was already there, so naming him the heir was quick and easy. It was a shortcut.

Are you tired of waiting for God? Does it seem like he is taking forever to answer your prayers? Are you looking for a shortcut, trying to make things happen in your own life? You can find a plan or make one of your own. It might even work. But it won’t lead to hope. It will lead you to a small, unimpressive solution. Over and over again, the author of Hebrews tells his readers to hold on with patience. To wait. To be diligent until the end. The very nature of hope involves waiting. And God promises that his hope is big enough to be worth it. God will always exceed expectations.

At our house, it never fails that about five or ten minutes before it’s time to eat dinner, one of our kids will come into the kitchen and say, “Can I have a snack? I’m starving.” Now I’m pretty sure that from a scientific standpoint, that statement is not true, but they act like waiting a few more minutes might just send them into a coma and it will be all my fault. I can try to explain that there’s a full meal being prepared -- nutritious, delicious, completely filling. Way more than a snack. They’d rather shove a handful of crackers or chips in their mouth.

Isn’t that just how we are with God? He’s got a whole banquet for us, but we hate waiting. So we insist on settling for snack food. We ask for the band-aid when God wants to heal us up.

The second thing Abraham does is

2. Cut out the unknown. Again, God hadn’t shared details of how he was going to bring his promises about. Abraham wanted something sure and concrete. So he chose a servant he could see over a child he couldn’t.

Scripture tells us the Lord works in mysterious ways, and sometimes I don't like mystery. I want clarity. So I choose options that remove the wonder. I opt for what's expected instead of seeing God do the unexpected.

It's really about control. I want God to include me in on his plans instead of trusting that he knows what he's doing. And if he's NOT going to include me, then I take matters into my own hands and find something predictable and safe.

God guarantees his promises, but he's under no obligation to tell us how he will accomplish them. Abraham thought choosing Eliezer would be simpler and more practical, cutting out the unknown.

Ultimately, what he did in that process was

3. Cut out the need for God. Hope required dependence, but naming Eliezer required nothing. With Abraham's plan, there was no need for God to do anything. The answer was already in place and available.

We tend to like plans where we're in control and where God doesn't have to act. It might be a fine plan. It might be perfectly satisfactory. But there's no hope involved, because we're not expecting God to act.

John Knox was a reformer and preacher in Scotland. He was a Catholic priest who became a Protestant in a period of history that kind of thinking could get you killed. Both of his mentors were burned at the stake. In the year 1547, John Knox was in the St. Andrews castle when it was seized by outside forces and Knox was taken prisoner and made a slave aboard a French galley ship. The slaves were forced to row all day without changing posture. Knox suffered so much during his imprisonment that his health never recovered the rest of his life. He got extremely sick with fever on the boat, and other slaves were sure he was going to die.

Just as he was at that lowest point physically, the boat he was on went back to Scotland to get more slaves, and as they passed the spires of St. Andrew's Church, another slave pointed it out to John Knox and said, "Do you recognize that?" And Knox replied,

Yes, I know it well; for I see the steeple of that place where God first in public opened my mouth to glory; and I am fully persuaded, how weak soever I now appear, that I shall not depart this life, till that my tongue shall glorify his godly name in the same place.

And you know what? God set him free, and he did preach there again.

This was the same John Knox whose heart was broken for his people and prayed to God, "Give me Scotland, or I die." And you know what? God did give him Scotland. John Knox transformed the country with his teaching. Against all human odds, the one time slave became a permanent part of God's work in the world.

That's hope – hope that recognizes God's plan for us is bigger than our circumstances. Nothing can stop God's promises from coming true. Whatever we're enslaved to, God can set us free. And that's only the beginning. I love that John Knox's big hope wasn't freedom – it was being able to share the gospel again. God's hope for us is even bigger than our own well being. God told Abraham he was going to bless the whole world through him. Abraham's hope extended to other people. And when we talk about our hope being big, we don't just mean God is going to heap blessing after blessing on us – we mean he's going to turn us into a blessing in the lives of other people. That's part of what our hope is all about.

Lesslie Newbigin writes, "It means that this particular body of people who bear the name of Jesus through history, this strange and often absurd company of people so feeble, so foolish, so often fatally compromised with the world...is the body which has the responsibility of bearing the secret of God's reign through world history."

It's mind boggling when you stop to think about it. God holds out so much for us – a huge hope. Purpose. Wholeness. Identity. Community. A future. A part in his work in the world. Becoming a blessing ourselves. Is the hope we settle for something far less than he intends?

Another truth about hope that the author of Hebrews reminds us of is that **God's hope is an exclusive relationship**. Over and over, Hebrews tells us to "hold on to the hope we profess." The alternative to that is letting go of it and grabbing something else as our hope.

Abraham's story is helpful here as well. Years after the incident with Eliezer, God did in fact bless Abraham with the birth of his son Isaac. He was the delight of his father's eyes, an incredible miracle child after years of waiting.

Then of course came God's terrible, unthinkable request. "Abraham, take Isaac up on the mountain and sacrifice him." It was the ultimate test of loyalty, and Abraham was willing to do it. Thankfully, God did not want him to actually go through with a physical sacrifice and he stopped him once Abraham had proved his trust in God. The sacrifice had already taken place in his heart. And it was at this point that God swore the oath the writer of Hebrews referred to:

Genesis 22:15-18

The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."

Much could be said about this incredible story of obedience. But I just want to make one observation in light of our topic this morning. Abraham loved Isaac. He was the answer

to his prayers. Isaac was the one through whom all of God's promises to Abraham would come true. And yet Abraham never transferred his hope from God to Isaac. He refused to let God's good gift become the center of his faith.

I think we are all too quick to see God's blessings in our lives and look to them as the source of our hope. We start to trust the gift instead of the giver. The new job we're sure will be our ticket to financial freedom. The relationship we hope is going to make us feel better about ourselves. The ministry at church that will finally let us use our gifts and talents the way they should be.

God gives us great blessings. But his hope is a jealous hope. He will not share us with another. If a blessing in our lives threatens to overtake our hearts, God will ask us, "Are you willing to give that up? Where are you choosing to put your hope?"

We'd like to hang on to God with one hand and hang on to our back up plan with the other. But there's no halfway when it comes to trusting God. It takes both hands, clinging to him with everything we've got.

A third truth the writer of Hebrews shares with us is that **God's hope motivates our present.**

Have you ever looked forward to something to the point of distraction? I'll admit it: I like to obsess over things in the future. I get consumed with thinking about possibilities. If I've ordered something, or entered a contest or if I'm saving up to buy something or even planning a family vacation, I like to spend my time contemplating when that day will finally arrive. I go over every possible scenario in my head. That's not such a great trait, because it means I can get distracted from important things happening right now.

There's an old saying that some Christians are so heavenly minded they're no earthly good, meaning they're so wrapped up in their future hope that they disengage from life here and now. "What does all this matter when I've got heaven waiting for me?"

That's not the kind of hope God calls us to. In fact it's the opposite. Look again at the first verse we read this morning.

God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them.

Our actions today matter for eternity. God will not forget what we've done on his behalf – he's going to reward it. That's motivation for living full lives this side of heaven. I like the concept of a future hope that encourages me to focus intensely on the moment.

Sometimes we feel guilty over the idea of doing good things out of a desire to get something in return. But Scripture consistently uses the language of rewards. God is just, and if he doesn't let sin slide by, good deeds won't go unnoticed either. Jesus himself said,

Revelation 22:12-13

Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done.

His eternal reward is with him, and it's not going to be a new car or a bigger house or whatever our current dream is. It's a truer, better and more lasting reward than anything earth has to offer.

If we're looking forward to heaven and hoping for that reward the way we should be, we won't be spending our time sitting around imagining what the pearly gates look like. The reality of the reward ahead of us serves as a motivator to live like people who are planning to spend eternity with God.

A final truth that stands out in this Hebrews passage is that **God's hope is solid**. The author calls it an anchor, which is such a great, descriptive way to picture it. I end with this one because it's such a stark contrast with the kind of hope we normally settle for. God's hope is nothing like the thin, wishful hope we talked about at the beginning.

A few years back, a movie came out called "Hope Floats," and one of the characters spoke about how when you're going through a tough time, hope always eventually floats to the surface, I guess meaning you can't keep it down. They should make a movie called "Hope Sinks," because that's more in line with the hope we have. It's an ANCHOR! It has weight. It's substantial. It's hooked into something permanent. It grounds us and keeps us from losing our way. I'm not just waiting for it to bubble up to the surface someday – it's already in place. To me, that sounds like a whole lot more interesting kind of hope.

The author of Hebrews goes out of his way to reinforce this idea of just how solid our hope is. He calls it "sure" and "steadfast," and he says it is what it is because of two things.

First, **it's based on God's own character**. God made a promise to Abraham. Then he went so far as to swear by himself. That's like truth squared, truth to the second power.

But you might be thinking, "That's great that he made those promises to Abraham, but what does that have to do with me?" I'm glad you asked. Paul tells us that those same promises apply to us.

Galatians 3:7-9

Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

We have just as much stake in these great promises as Abraham. So God's swearing by himself to Abraham is a swearing by himself to us as well. In other words, our hope is as

unshakeable as it can get. God's promise of blessing and salvation and a future is ours. And it doesn't depend on anything outside of God – it's all because he said it's true and he is incapable of saying anything that's not true.

My hope doesn't hinge on how hopeful I feel. I am not the one keeping hope alive. God is true when I am doing well, and God is true when I'm failing miserably. My hope is not secure because of how much I believe it but because God said it.

A second reason our hope is solid is because **it's born out by Jesus' actions.**

We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf.

Let's stick with that anchor metaphor for a minute. You can have a great big anchor. One that's the heaviest you've ever seen, attached to an extra strong chain. It's the best, strongest anchor money can buy. But as long as it's still in the boat, it won't do you much good out in a storm. The anchor needs to be in the water and grab on to something to secure the boat.

God's statements promising to save us and bless would just be like an anchor sitting in a boat, waiting to be put into effect. But Jesus entered our stormy waters. He came into the swirling uncertainties of this world. He took God's spoken truth and brought it into effect. The fact of his death on the cross secured our hope. God didn't just say his promises – he lived them through his son. His action sealed our hope forever and showed just how far he was willing to go to bring us that hope.

We're going to celebrate that act here in a few moments in the Lord's Supper. As we prepare to do that, I'd like you to think for a moment about your own need for hope.

Finish these sentences for yourself:

Right now, I am most hoping for...

What is it? Peace? Forgiveness? A changed situation?

I've been making my own plan for...

Maybe you've been trying to cut out the wait time or cut out the need to hope in God for something at all. Take a moment to talk to God about where you've struck out on your own.

Instead of God, I've been looking for hope in...

It could be something good God has given you, a blessing from him. Maybe you're looking for it in your work or your entertainment or your spouse or a certain set of circumstances to line up. God calls you back to himself.

Maybe you've never really put your hope in Jesus and what he did for you. Having real hope is as simple as saying to him, "Jesus, I believe you did what you did for me. I believe in your death and resurrection and I want eternal life with you. Please forgive my sin and give me hope." And he will. It's already there, and you can take hold of it this morning.

We can stick with flimsy, fleeting hopes that never materialize or we can exchange them for the one hope that is sure and solid and bigger than what we could dream up. Francis Xavier said, "give up your small ambitions and come save the world." God invites you and I to be part of his incredible mission, sharing his hope and enjoying his blessing.