

Hope

I want to ask you how you are? No, really. How are you? Take a minute to check in with yourself. Do you notice any feelings arising to the surface? Maybe some tension in your chest or gut? Maybe you feel relaxed and at peace? Where are you in this moment? The last 22 months have been something out of a sci-fi movie. Things that in previous times, we never dreamt would be reality. All illusion of control, dashed. Change and uncertainty a constant. And I am just wondering, how are you?

Speaking for myself, I think my gut-level response is not great. It feels like as soon as we get our feet back under us, something else floods to the surface. Of course, we have all struggled in different ways in the past 22 months: some with illness, some with grief, some with anxiety, some with loneliness, some with heartbreak, some with transition, some with disappointment, some with anxiety, some with depression, the list goes on. The one thing that I can't get out of my mind though is how much change we have all experienced over the past 22 months. The more I reflected on this, the more I think about how one of the few constants in this world is change. And yet, how many of us enjoy change and thrive in it? I have heard more times than I can count, "I don't do well with change" and that same statement is true for me also. We are creatures of habit. Many of us thrive in routine and structure and even the more spontaneous spirited of us often do not enjoy adjusting to big life disruptions. Sure, there is always the exception, but change, transition, and uncertainty are hard. And I wonder if that is the thing, under the thing? I wonder if it's not change so much that we struggle with, but with the uncertainty and lack of control we experience because of the change?

These thoughts naturally beg the question then: what certainty do I have? Can anything make me feel safe, secure, anchored to something? Well, according to Hebrews 6:13-20, the answer is pretty simple: hope. Now, I know you are likely thinking something along the lines of "hoping isn't as simple as it sounds. If you only knew what I have been through, you would know how hard, maybe even impossible, it feels to hope. How scary that is for me." Or maybe even, "Great hope, got it, but how exactly do I do that? What practically does it look like to hope?" These are all great questions and thoughts that many of us share. These are questions I have wrestled with myself. This will not be a post that tells you to repress your feelings and get over it, to overlook your struggles and look for the brightside of things, to ignore the very real pain and hurt you are facing, or to hope blindly without reason. Instead, I would like to use this passage in Hebrews to explain why we have good reason for hope and how we can daily practice hope.

Hebrews 6:13-19-The Certainty of God's Promise (ESV)

13 For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, 14 saying, "Surely I will bless you and multiply you." 15 And thus Abraham,[a] having patiently waited, obtained the promise. 16 For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. 17 So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, 18 so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. 19 We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, 20 where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

To fully understand this passage, let's look at a brief background of Hebrews. It was written by an unknown author, although most scholars believe him to be either Paul or Apollos. However, what is certain about the book, is that it was written by someone who had extensive knowledge of the Jewish laws and religion, likely a practicing Jew before Jesus came. Now, likely converted after either seeing Jesus after his death or being told of the Gospel through other believers. The aim of this book is to explain salvation from a Jewish perspective and to display Jesus as the great and final High Priest. A working understanding of the laws and regulations of the Jews is important to fully understand this book and passage as the author's intent is to portray how Jesus came to fulfill the law, the prophecies, and become the Jews' (and world's) connection to God.

Now let's jump into the passage. In verse 13, we see mention of Abraham and the promise. The "promise" referring to God's message to Abraham, "Surely I will bless and multiply you." In those days, it was common that when a promise or

covenant was made, an oath was sworn. In our world, think about those testifying in court. "Do you promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing, but the truth or so help you God?" Same concept here. However, who or what can the God of the universe swear on? He is the ultimate authority in heaven and on earth. Still today, we include "or so help you God" in our oaths. Therefore God swore upon himself that He would bless Abraham and that the savior of the world (Jesus) would be brought forth from his people as evidenced in verses 14-18. (See other examples in Genesis 17; Exodus 19; Matthew 1; and most of the Old Testament).

So why is it significant that God swore on Himself? Pay attention to the words first used in verse 17... "unchangeable character of His (God's) purpose." God's character does not change. Who He is, never waivers, never falters, and is never in question. Now, we may have questions about how we perceive God's character, and I think He welcomes those, but His character in itself, is unchanging. The God of the universe is gracious, kind, loving, merciful, just, all powerful, all knowing, all seeing and has always been those things and will always be those things. He is constant and He is steady. So move down to verse 18, scripture says "so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie." So the first unchangeable thing is God's character, the second is that He cannot lie. Relating directly to His infallible character, His honesty. At the core, His trustworthiness. Therefore, in the context of explaining why God swore upon himself to Abraham, the author of Hebrews answers our question about what is certain in this world: God's character. Now moving to verse 18, he states that because of the unchangeable character of God, we can "hold fast to the hope set before us." Verse 19 states, "We have this (meaning God's unchangeable character as well as His promise to restore our standing with Him through Jesus) as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul..." So according to verse 19, hope anchors the soul.

Now, imagine an anchor. An anchor for a cruise ship or aircraft carrier can weigh over 60,000 pounds! When I read this verse, I often imagine a stormy and dark sea and a boat, miles from shore in the middle of it all, being beaten and battered by waves and wind. I can hear the thunder and lightning crash and see the spray of the dark, cold sea hit the boat. But in my eye's mind, while the boat rocks and tips, it is never destroyed. The boat never drift, because it has been securely anchored. The only thing keeping the boat afloat is the steadfastness of the anchor. That is how I picture hope as described in verse 19. When the storms of life are raging, when waves are hitting one after the other, when all seems lost, there is hope. Keeping my boat from being destroyed or dragged out to sea. And that hope lies in God's steady and unchangeable character.

Think it couldn't get better? Well you'd be wrong Verse 19 continues, "...a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest after the order of Melchizedek." At the end of this verse, the author expands the definition of hope to include, the relationship we can have with God through Jesus.

Again, historical context is important to understand this scripture. God gave very strict instructions on how the Jewish tabernacle was to be constructed. In the inner-most place of the tabernacle, was a special and sacred room known as the Holy of Holies. It was in this place, where the Spirit of God dwelt (see Exodus 26). Only once a year, could the High Priest (the bridge between God and the Jewish people) enter into this place. He had to undergo many cleansing rituals and there could be no unrepentant sin in his life. Before entering, he had to make sacrifices for himself and for the people of Israel because no sinful man can stand before a Holy God and live. To separate the Holy of Holies from the rest of the tabernacle, there was a long veil or curtain. So by now, you're probably thinking "thanks for the history lesson, but why does that matter?" Because in Matthew 27:51 as Jesus dies on the cross and gives up His spirit to death, the temple curtain, the one that the Hebrew writer is discussing, is torn in two. Thus, a physical symbol that Jesus destroyed the barrier that separated us from the holiness of God. Now do you see why this is so important? What better hope do we have than the hope that Christ has given us? Hope that we are unconditionally loved by a holy God, hope that he wants a relationship with us, hope that through the Holy Spirit we are never alone, hope that even death cannot defeat us, and no power on heaven or earth can separate us from the love of God?! The author of Hebrews knew this and paints a beautiful picture of hope as an anchor holding us down, making us secure in a constantly changing and unstable world. This hope is truly the only thing that never changes. That we can depend on without fault.

Some of you may still be thinking, “I understand that, I believe that, and I know that in my head, but how do I get it to my heart? How do I daily and actively practice hoping?” This is a question Jesus and I have been discussing for quite a while now, and I have far from “figured out”. I realized some time ago that we are often told to hope, but that we are rarely taught how to hope. So, I started asking Jesus, what does it look like to live a life of hope?

While this is still something I am very much in the learning stage of, He lead me to Hebrews 6. Which explains that hope looks like constantly being reminded of the unchangeable character of God. How do we do this? Scripture. Nowhere else is God’s character more clearly revealed than in His word. Also, in prayer. Ask that the Lord reveal his character to you. Begin to look for the characteristics of God in other believers. Another hope practice that has been helpful for me is to remember God’s faithfulness. Sometimes this looks like a gratitude list in my journal, sometimes it looks like writing down one way I have seen God work throughout my day on a note in my phone, sometimes it looks like going to a friend and asking them how they see the Lord being faithful in my life. Hope can also look like finding ways to partner with God in His process of redeeming the world, whether it be through formal ministry, providing a meal for someone, sharing life with a friend, starting a garden, taking time to rest, anything that serves as a reminder to you of the redemption and healing we have in Christ.

So quick recap. Life is hard, stressful, constantly changing, uncertain, and leaves us feeling overwhelmed and out of control. Which leads us to the question, is there any hope or stability? Hebrews 6:13-19, relays to us that we do have hope and it serves as an anchor in this uncertain world. Our hope is in the 1) the unchangeable character of God, 2) His trustworthiness, and 3) the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. How do we practice hope, even when we feel discouraged, broken, and not hopeful? Through studying scripture, learning about the character of God, engaging in godly community, choosing to search for the ways He has been faithful, and through partnering with God in His story of redemption. In our world that feels anything but hopeful, let us choose to be anchored to hope.

PS: Some of you may be struggling with circumstances that make hoping, particularly challenging. Maybe a miscarriage, the death of a friend or family member, a terminal illness, a long standing battle with depression, or other circumstances. If this is you, I want you to know that you are seen. Certain circumstances can often make hoping feel impossible and unattainable. The above is not a perfect prescription for hope, just a place to start. These words are meant to encourage you, not to man-handle you to “do better.” If you are someone who finds themselves in a particularly hopeless season, I would encourage you to reach out to friends, family members, small group leaders, the elders of the church, or a counselor. Sometimes, we need others to hope for us, while we learn to hope for ourselves.

Also if you would like to discuss hope more, want to share some ways you practice hope, or feel like this devo didn’t fully address a component of hope in contact of Hebrews 6, important part please reach out. I would love to grab a coffee, chat with you, hear your thoughts, and learn from you. Thank you for taking the time to read friends. Grace and peace, always.

-Haleigh Bevins