

Chapter 11 – Imitate those who have inherited the promises - Hebrews 6

Part 2

The author's longing is that his readers will respond in faith to all that God has promised and inherit the fullness of the great promises given to Abraham – to be blessed and to be a blessing. This is what Christ has made possible and is the purpose of his ongoing High Priestly ministry.

In this chapter we study the second half of Hebrews chapter 6 and conclude with a review of the ideas of rest and inheritance we have encountered in this letter.

Prayer

Use the *thanksgiving, remembrance, confidence* model of prayer as you think over what you learnt from the first part of Hebrews chapter 6 and look forward to studying the rest of this chapter.

Background

It is quite clear that the author has, from the outset, had the question of promises, inheritance, oaths and faith at the forefront of his thinking and all this has been presented in the context of the promises given to Abraham. Those promises are foundational for much New Testament teaching and were greatly used by 1st century preachers.¹ Even Gentile converts would soon become very familiar with Abraham's life and the promises God made to him because they formed the scriptural foundation for the Christian doctrine of justification by faith. This letter would have been read and understood in that light, and we too must interpret it in that light.

This section is based on Gen 12-18 and 21-22 which you should read. Additional background is found at Num 23:19, Lev 16:2 and Ps 110.

Detail

Heb 6:9

Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case—things that accompany salvation.

... confident of better things in your case

The author is confident that his readers will not fall away but will be fruitful believers. Jesus said, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name" (Joh 15:16). Such blessed fruitfulness accompanies salvation for those who are faithful. The author is confident that his readers will not remain fruitless and suffer God's curse, but go on to bear fruit that will stand the test of God's fire and bring eternal rewards.

We may truly have confidence of better things than falling away for those believers who heed the warnings and exhortations of this letter and press on to genuine maturity.

... things that accompany salvation

The author trusts that his readers will carefully study what he has written and diligently seek to work it out in their lives. If they do so, he is confident they will attain "things that accompany salvation." Some take this to mean those things that come with salvation, as part of the package when a person comes to saving faith. Things such as receiving the Holy Spirit, the promise of eternal life, the hope of resurrection, fellowship within the church and such like. But his readers are

¹ See for example Acts 7, Stephen's address.

already saved, so he must be meaning additional blessings or qualities, beyond those that a young believer has.

Heb 6:10

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.

He says we will get these “things that accompany salvation” because God will not forget our good works and love. The implication here is that on judgement day God rewards us for our love and good works. So part of what accompanies salvation for a mature believer is an eternal reward for good works. There are many passages in the gospels and the letters of the New Testament that clearly teach that the good works of believers, done in faith and love towards God are rewarded, both in this life and also eternally in the life to come. Jesus spoke of rewarding faithful servants with cities to rule over. Many do not find this prospect appealing! Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, writes about his longing to know Christ better and fulfil all God’s purposes for him. Whatever our eternal reward, we can be sure that it will involve closeness to the God we love and will suit our recreated bodies and purified temperaments. We will not be burdened with responsibilities but be wonderfully satisfied by God and completely fulfilled in what He gives us to do.

But that is not all that accompanies salvation for a mature believer...

Heb 6:11-12

¹¹ We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. ¹² We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.

A note on the translation

The NIV splits the single Greek sentence into two making it much easier to read but losing the connection between the two parts. Consider the phrase, “...show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure.” This makes me think the author is wanting them to continue ministering to God’s people (v10) to the end in order to make their hope sure. Or putting this more simply, ministering to God’s people ensures we attain our hope. This reading is made explicit by the NLT translators:

“Our great desire is that you will keep right on loving others as long as life lasts, in order to make certain that what you hope for will come true.”

But this has nothing to do with what he has been saying up to now, and nothing to do with what follows. The majority of English translations keep the whole sentence together. The NASB is typical:

And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness in realizing the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

This translation suggests the author wants them to apply to the issue of “realizing the full assurance of hope” the same diligence with which they serve the saints. This is how Eugene Peterson understands it. This is the Message rendering:

“And now I want each of you to extend that same intensity toward a full-bodied hope, and keep at it till the finish.”

This is completely in keeping with the whole letter to this point.

The NIV has made it easier to read but has also changed its meaning. I will follow the NASB for these verses.

... each of you...

The concern the author has is relevant for all of us, not just the weak ones or the keen ones. This letter is undoubtedly difficult and contains passages that theologians have argued over for centuries. But we must not let this put us off. My prayer is that this study will increase your confidence to study scripture yourself and prayerfully seek the Holy Spirit's help in understanding its application to your life. We cannot and should not rely on others to spoon-feed us the word of God.

...the same diligence...

The author has just commended his readers for their ministry to God's people and now wants them to be as diligent in their faith as they are in their serving. This is quite a challenge. Most of us read the story of Mary and Martha and identify with Martha. We are much more comfortable busying ourselves with activity, whether it be housework, hobbies, DIY or even serving in the church or community. We like to be busy and if we can busy ourselves in service to the church then that feels all the more worthwhile. I love to achieve things. Sometimes if I have had a morning when I don't seem to have achieved very much I de-scale the kettle and feel so much better afterwards. I am so easily distracted from prayer by a hundred little jobs I suddenly realise need doing. Recognising my nature, I try to take it in hand. Sometimes I will allow myself to de-scale the kettle (this has become a metaphor for any small job that is a quick-fix for a sense of achievement) and then give myself to prayer and other times I will say "leave the kettle, stop dilly-dallying and get down to prayer."

To be diligent in prayer and bible study and listening to God is, for most of us, a serious challenge that we rarely feel we have met adequately. The author knows this – he said they ought to be teachers but were still on baby-food – but urges them to consider the issues at stake and take themselves in hand.

We live in an instant age where we want instant answers to prayer and instant maturity. We have little time for nurturing and growth so we hope that a seminar full of distilled teaching will do instead. Information is poured out in the hope that somehow change will result. In our society the idea of humble submission, patient waiting and persevering diligence is not popular but perhaps it is still necessary.

...to realize the full assurance of hope until the end;"

Realizing the hope

It is not obvious what the author means by "realize the full assurance of hope until the end." But the second half of the sentence looks like a parallelism² with the first (I have rearranged the second half of the sentence to match the clauses):

First half	Second half
We desire you to show diligence	that you will not be sluggish but imitate the faithful
to realize	to inherit the promises
the full assurance of hope until the end	through faith and patience

Without this parallelism the sentence doesn't really make sense. Summarised, it would look like this:

"Show diligence to realize your hope so that you will inherit the promises."

² A parallelism is where a thought expressed one way is expressed again using different words.

But we do not “realise our hope” in order to “inherit the promises”, they are one and the same thing. The promises are what we hope in and realizing them (experiencing their fulfilment) is the same thing as inheriting them.³ The second half explains the first.⁴

This exhortation to faith reminds us of Hebrews 11 where he expands it, discussing first the meaning of faith and then cataloguing those who have demonstrated “the full assurance of hope until the end.” There we read that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”(NASB). In other words it is *faith* that gives assurance to our *hope*; it is faith that makes us confident in God’s promises. The chapter commends those saints for holding fast their hope in God’s promises right to the end of their lives. But we are told in v13 and v39 that “all these died in faith, without receiving the promises.”

The parallel between Hebrews 6:11-12 and chapter 11 helps us to understand what the author means. “Realize” literally means to make real. Along with “inherit,” both words mean to actually experience; to enter into. So to “realize hope” or “inherit the promises” means to experience or receive the hoped for promises.

Full assurance of hope

Biblical hope is not wishful thinking like worldly hope. I hope to have home-made pudding tonight but that is worldly hope. It might not happen. Biblical hope is the expectation of things that God has promised. It comes with the assurance that what God has promised will certainly come to pass. It is anticipation of a certainty.

The full assurance of hope is the strong confidence we can have in that hope when we have strong faith. Full assurance says, “I will certainly receive what God has promised.” To *realize* that assurance is to actually receive what God has promised. When I start to think it would be nice to have pudding, I can have the worldly kind of hope. When my wife promises me pudding I can have *assurance* of hope. When I see her making it I can have *full assurance* of hope. When I eat the pudding I *realize* that hope.

So the writer is saying something like this:

“We want you to be diligent in exercising strong faith in God’s promises, having deep assurance of their reliability no matter what life throws at you, so that you will regularly experience their fulfilment. Maintain this faith every day of your life. Do not be sluggish but be inspired by the faith and patience of others who have learnt to enjoy the fulfilment and reality of God’s promises.”

It is easy to see how good teaching along these lines will help to protect a believer from falling away. A Christian may have been taught the doctrines of repentance and faith, have been baptised in water and in the Spirit and received Spiritual gifts. He may believe in his future bodily resurrection and the coming judgement. He may walk in the light, rejoice in God’s grace, experience the Holy Spirit’s power and presence and move in gifts of healing and prophecy. He may enjoy all these things and yet not have strong confidence in God’s covenant of love, care, protection and direction for him. I have too many friends – formerly respected leaders of churches – that have fallen from faith through disappointments, hurt or sexual temptation. I wonder if they had been diligent in imitating those who through faith and patience inherit the promises? I suspect that the daily pressures and responsibilities of leadership had drawn their focus away from their confidence in God and set their eyes on success, achievement and recognition.

³ At least, this is how the phrase “inherit the promises” is used here. Because God swore the oath to Abraham for the sake of his heirs (v17), we know we have already inherited the *words* of the promise. We do not need God to swear them to us. It is the outworking of the promise that we hope for.

⁴ The NASB joins the two halves with the word “so” which is not found in the Greek. The AV uses a colon which is more fitting.

...that you will not be sluggish...

It is all too easy to find ourselves assessing God's faithfulness by the response and faithfulness of others. We can mistake our hopes for God's and our values for His and it is all too easy for people to prophesy what we are hoping for. We may pray fervently for a big outreach event and have all kinds of pictures and prophecies of a great harvest only to find that it pours with rain all day, there is a major football match on and not a single visitor turns up. Sometimes there is a spiritual battle to be fought but often, I suspect, we have not taken sufficient care to seek God's will. It is easy to grow faith-weary, especially when we have been round the track a few times. It is easy to give up praying for the sick when you see few results. It is easy to grow weary of evangelistic campaigns when we see little fruit. It is easy to grow weary of prayer when so few people come to the prayer meeting. It is easy to grow weary of prophecies when you have heard the same expectation of imminent revival for decades. It is easy to grow weary of the same problems with the same people who never seem to change. Nevertheless, we are urged not to become weary, but to be stubborn believers!

Fighting the fight of faith

The Israelites got weary in the desert and ended up with hard hearts and an oath preventing them from moving on. Remembering this, we need to encourage one another in exercising strong faith in God's promises and be inspired by the faith and patience of others. Faith is described many times as a fight:

Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. (1Co 9:26)

The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. (2Co 10:4)

Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. (1Ti 6:12)

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. (2Ti 4:7)

I wonder what our hearts reveal about the nature of the fight we are engaged in? Is it to win every argument, to get our way, to dominate the agenda, to intimidate those who oppose us, to control those we are working with...? Earlier in 1 Timothy Paul tells us how the fight of faith is fought:

Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight. (1Ti 1:18)

We fight the fight of faith by following the promises we have been given – in Timothy's case, through prophecy. Our fight should not be with our colleagues and nor is it a matter of praying against Satan, but of strengthening our faith in God and His promises. The armour Paul writes about in Ephesians 6:10-18 and 1 Thess 5:8 concerns confidence in God: truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, hope, love, salvation, God's word, prayer in the Spirit. The fight of faith is the fight to maintain our strong confidence in God so that we are empowered to continue pushing forward despite every setback.

... but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

This thought is developed extensively in chapter 11 and again near the end of the letter, "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith." (13:7)

Paul was not afraid to tell others to follow his example and imitate his faith.⁵ The example of faithful saints from the past and present can be a huge encouragement to us. The reading of Christian biographies is often found to have been very significant in the lives of fruitful and effective Christians. In addition we should always be looking for people we can get to know whose

⁵ See Acts 20:35, 1Co 4:16, 7:7, 11:1, Phil 3:17, 4:9, 2Th 3:7, 2Ti 1:13

lives have qualities we wish to emulate. We should not let ourselves feel guilty or inadequate when we see others who are highly gifted or deeply loving or who have an intimacy with God that feels so impossible to us. We should truly rejoice in the grace of God on their lives and do all we can to let some of what they have inspire us to reach for more.

Discipleship takes time and grows from seeds of faith that are watered and nurtured until they bear fruit. Time spent meditating on the scriptures will reap rewards of changed minds and hearts. Time spent reading about the apostolic fathers and the desert fathers will inspire us to devotion to intimacy with God and the transformation of our communities. Time spent reading Christian biographies will help stir our faith and motivate us to get involved in global mission. Time spent with our church leaders will help us catch their vision and become a vital part of the local mission to see the Kingdom of God come on earth. Time spent with our friends will help “iron sharpen iron” so that we live more Christ-like lives. Time spent with godly parents, whether natural or “adopted” will help us gain from their wisdom and them to gain from our relative youthfulness and friendship.

God made us for community and relationship. It is right that we encourage one another and right that we should need encouragement from one another. If you find prayer or bible study on your own difficult, then don’t beat yourself up about it, find a friend and do it together. Let us be encouragers and imitators of faith.

The Promises

I will leave the consideration of what has been promised to the end of this chapter, since what follows contributes to the answer.

Heb 6:13-15

⁽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.

God’s promise to Abraham

Having exhorted his readers to press on to inherit all God has promised, the author refers to Abraham. This is not surprising since Abraham was often held up as an example great faith – Paul does so in Romans 4. Abraham is someone we can imitate who through faith and patience inherited the promise. But the focus of the first sentence is not Abraham but the complete assurance with which God gave the promise.

...after waiting patiently

It was not easy for Abraham to trust God for His promise. He was 75 when God first called him to move to Canaan with the promise to bless him and make him a great nation (Gen 12:1-4). But then famine drove him to Egypt where Sarah was taken by Pharaoh. They escaped and returned to Canaan where his brother, Lot, took the best fertile land in the Jordan valley leaving Abram with the hill country. Following victory over some raiding kings God told Abram not to fear, saying He was his shield and reward. But Abram was not happy. He said “What will you give me since I have no son to be my heir?” So God made a further promise saying Abram would have descendents as numerous as the stars (Gen 15:5). This is the point where it says, “Abram believed the Lord and He accounted it to him for righteousness.” Following this, when Abram was 86, he slept with Hagar since Sarah was barren, and Ishmael was born. Although this was not God’s way of fulfilling His promise, it made sense to Abram, since the promise had been for offspring from *his* flesh – Sarah had not been mentioned (Gen 17:4). Then having invested 14 years in bringing up Ishmael as his heir, God spoke to Abram again about his descendents saying they would come through Sarah. Abram pleaded with God to fulfil his promise through Ishmael, since Abram was 99 and Sarah was well past it at 90 years old. But God made a covenant with Abram concerning Sarah, introducing circumcision as a sign (Gen 17) and changing his name to Abraham.

...Abraham received what was promised.

Sarah soon got pregnant and Isaac was born. Then when Isaac was grown into a young lad, God tested Abraham's faith by commanding him to sacrifice Isaac.⁶ He passed the test, Isaac was saved and God's promise to Abraham was confirmed with an oath, saying, "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" (Gen 22:16-18). Although both Paul and the author of this letter record Abraham as waiting patiently and not wavering regarding the promise of God, it was certainly not easy or straight forward and the fullness of the promise was not to be seen for thousands of years.⁷

Heb 6:16-18

⁽¹⁶⁾ Men 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 offered to us may be greatly encouraged.

God's oath of blessing

Previously the author has quoted the time when God swore an oath against Israel, but now he remind us that God also swears oaths of blessing. The point being made is that "God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear." The author has been urging his readers to put confident faith in God's promises and so points to the way the promise was given to Abraham with an unshakeable guarantee. This also emphasises that Christianity is the fulfilment of this promise and not a departure from the Jewish faith.

... two unchangeable things

The "two unchangeable things" by which God confirmed his promise are God's word (v14), and His oath (v17). God originally made the promise without an oath, saying "I will bless you..." (Gen 12:1-3) but later He added the oath saying, "I swear by myself... I will surely bless you" (Gen 22:16-18). Usually God's declarations are conditional on obedience (or disobedience in the case of a judgement) but sometimes God makes it unconditional by swearing an oath. The incident over Saul's disobedience is illuminating.

"The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day, and has given it to a neighbour of yours, who is better than you. And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or repent; for he is not a man, that he should repent." ... And the LORD repented that he had made Saul king over Israel." (1 Sam 15:28-35 RSV)

There seems, at first, to be a contradiction here. God had chosen Saul as king but because of his disobedience God repented of His choice (v11,35). Yet this announcement is followed immediately by the statement, quoted from Numbers, that God does not repent! The explanation is that the original selection of Saul was conditional on his obedience. In 1 Sam 13:13 he was told that had he

⁶ If ever there was a time when Abraham was going to become "dull of hearing"(5:11 NASB) it was now! It is much easier to answer God's call to leave behind the past for a promised future than it is to obey God in an action that would seem to crush our hopes for that future. Faith is truly revealed when we obey God contrary to all our wisdom and understanding.

⁷ In the mean time, God reiterated the promise to the people under Moses: "But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today" (Deu 8:18). God has always been faithful to the covenant promise He swore to Abraham, blessing in every way those who faithfully trust Him.

been obedient God would have established his kingdom forever. But following his disobedience, God made an unconditional and irrevocable declaration that the kingdom would be taken from him. It is concerning this declaration that God will not repent. The promise combined with an oath is utterly unchangeable whether it be for blessing or for cursing.

...we who have fled

The author describes his readers as having “fled to take hold of the hope offered to us.” The majority of translations have “fled for refuge to take hold of.” The meaning is fleeing from danger to find security in the hope God has offered us. It is not obvious why such a thing should be said about the promise God gave to Abraham since it was primarily a promise of countless descendants who would bring blessing to the whole world.

For the Jews the phrase would conjure up the image of a person fleeing to a city of refuge after accidentally killing someone. Once within the city walls they could not be killed in vengeance. Perhaps the author sees a parallel with this and our fleeing to Christ from the condemnation of the Law because of our sin.

...the hope offered to us

The author now makes it clear why he has been writing about God’s promise to Abraham. He says that we have fled to “take hold of the hope offered to us.” This hope is the promise God made to Abraham, which He did with an unchangeable oath “because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised.” God used an oath for *our* benefit. He wants us to be absolutely confident in His promise to bless us, multiply our fruitfulness and make us a blessing to the world.

By describing *believers* as having “fled to take hold of the hope,” the author shows that he sees the promise given to Abraham as foundational for all God’s promises to *us*. This is really quite surprising. Why, when we have the promises of salvation, would we be harping back to an Old Testament promise made to Abraham thousands of years ago? Why is *that* promise the anchor of our soul? Surely one of Jesus’ promises, such as “Come to me all who labour and are heavily laden and I will give rest for your souls” is a more important promise than one given to Abraham? Yet the promises given to Abraham are held up as our inheritance several times through the New Testament. For example:

“And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, ‘Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.’” (Ac 3:25)

“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.” (Gal 3:8-9)

“If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” (Gal 3:29)

It is quite clear that the Apostles saw the gospel as the fulfilment of God’s ancient promises to Abraham. So whereas *we* might say something like “He redeemed us so we could live in peace with God” and “If you belong to Christ, then you will go to heaven” (following Gal 3:14 and 29), Paul states the purpose of salvation is so we can inherit the promise God gave to Abraham! Why should this be so, and if it is indeed so, why do we not give more attention to the promises given to Abraham? Both Paul in Galatians and the writer to the Hebrews argue that inheriting the promises given to Abraham is what makes a mature Christian who will live by faith, walk in the Spirit and not waiver in trials and temptations.

It is the promise to bless and multiply us and make us a blessing to the world which is the hope set before us. This promise is the refuge we have fled to.

...may be greatly encouraged.

The point of all this talk about Abraham and the certainty of God's promise to him is so that we may be greatly encouraged. It is so that we might press on to inherit that promise and not fall away as so many immature believers do. It is so that we might enter the promised rest and not find ourselves on the wrong side of an oath against us because of unbelief.

We may have many hopes and feel that God has spoken to us various promises, perhaps through prophecy or in our reading of scripture. But we are often not absolutely 100% certain that God has spoken to us, or that we have understood completely. We may be encouraged and start to move forward in faith, but when difficulties and setbacks arise we may wonder if we have heard correctly. We may be in danger of giving up, or indeed it may be right that we give up if we have got our guidance wrong. But there are some things about which God wants us to have unshakeable confidence. The most foundational of these is that we have inherited His promise to Abraham.

Heb 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 Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek.

We have this hope as an anchor for the soul ...

In a world of uncertainty and troubles and suffering, the promise that Almighty God has sworn on oath to bless us is a pretty amazing truth to have as the anchor of our souls. Of course this promise includes our eternal salvation, but it is not limited to that. Having our sins forgiven so that we can have peace with God is only the essential beginning. The best is still to come. Abraham believed and it was counted to him as righteousness. That is where we start. We believe in Christ as our saviour and that faith obtains for us His righteousness. We are now at peace with God and counted as His children. We are assured of deliverance on the Day of Judgement and a place with Christ when the new heavens and earth replace this decaying creation. But all this is just the beginning, the entry point. This qualifies us as Abraham's heirs. Now we should be asking about our inheritance. How is God wanting to bless me? How is He wanting to multiply me? How is He wanting to bless the world through me? Absolute confidence in these promises and living out the answers to these questions is what marks a mature believer who will one day hear God say, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Master." Such a hope is an anchor that stops us drifting away (2:1).

It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain ...

This great promise of blessing, this anchor for our troubled souls, this great hope which by faith we have full assurance of, this treasure over which God has sworn to be faithful – it is not left in the bible for us to read, or in our hearts for us to meditate on, it is engraved on God's own heart, it has been written in the heavens with the shed blood of Jesus. The promise, the writer says, is in the very presence of God in Heaven.

...where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf.

Jesus, the forerunner or pioneer of our faith, has entered the presence of God on our behalf to intercede for us as our great High Priest. Jesus is our representative before God to ensure that the promise God swore to Abraham is applied fully and sympathetically and constantly to our lives.

He has become a high priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek.

But the high priestly ministry of Christ is different to the Levitical priesthood set up by Moses. They were forever making sacrifices to deal with sin. Melchizedek came with blessing. He met Abram when he had seen off the marauding kings, bringing bread and wine and saying, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who

delivered your enemies into your hand.”⁸ Melchizedek’s ministry was one of blessing. This is Christ’s ongoing ministry. He has finished the work of sacrifice for sins. At the start of the letter the author wrote, “After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.” Sin has been dealt with “once for all”. We do not need to keep worrying about forgiveness. If we do sin, Jesus’ already shed blood assures us of forgiveness. The high-priestly role of Christ is not like the Levitical priesthood. He is not interceding for us to obtain forgiveness. His ministry is like Melchizedek’s – it is to obtain blessing for us. Jesus’ full-time ministry is to take the promise God swore on oath to Abraham and apply it thoroughly and liberally to those who believe. This is what the writer to the Hebrews is so excited about. It is what I am excited about. And I hope you will become excited about this too.

A look at the surprises

We return now to some of our opening questions that need further consideration.

What has been promised?

Justification by faith and inheriting the promise

When we read the account of God giving the promises to Abraham we notice that justification by faith and inheriting the promise were two distinct things for Abraham. The promise of fathering a great nation was given, along with the command to travel to the Promised Land in God’s first recorded interaction with Abram. Abram demonstrated his faith by his obedience, but when God spoke to Abram in a vision, he took the opportunity to question God about his lack of children (Gen 15:1). God reassured him with a more specific promise and Abram believed God. This, we are told, was the point at which Abram’s faith was credited as righteousness (Gen 15:6).

The New Testament writers take this as the foundation for justification by faith in Christ. Abram’s simple faith in what God said to him, without any action on Abram’s part, is taken as the moment of his salvation and our simple faith in Christ, without any action on our part, is taken as the moment of our salvation.

But it is very important to note that Abram had not yet received what he was promised and neither had God sworn the oath of blessing. Abraham’s inheritance was not his salvation, the two are separate in nature and in time. It took many years of persevering faith and further reiterations of the promise, along with the sign of circumcision before the beginning of the promise was seen in the birth of Isaac. This was followed by a further great testing (the command to sacrifice Isaac) before the promise was confirmed by God swearing an oath. Even then, the fullness of the promise was not made possible until Jesus came and brought salvation.

So we see that by faith we are justified and become Abraham’s offspring. This is a partial fulfilment of God’s promise to Abraham (that he would father an innumerable people) but according to the New Testament writers we are also *heirs* of Abraham’s promise. The promise God swore to Abraham is given to us and we obtain its benefits the same way. Our justification is by faith but the promise is fulfilled after faith and patience. Justification puts us right with God; the promise we inherit concerns fruitfulness and blessing.

Having and inheriting the promise

We must also note that having the promise is not the same as inheriting the promise. You inherit something when you have actually received it from your forebears, before then it is only a promised inheritance. When talking about inheriting a house it is very straight forward. Until the house is mine, I have not actually inherited it. But when it comes to promises a subtlety is introduced. For example, my wife has a promise of a pension when she retires and her employer says that if she dies

⁸ Gen 14:18-20

I can inherit her pension. Now if she were to die before she retired, I would inherit the *promise* of a pension immediately but not start to receive the *money* until the year she would have retired. Thus I inherit the promise immediately, but I would only inherit its benefit after some years.

This difference between the promise and its benefits applies to Abraham's promise. His children and descendants inherited the *promises* but did not automatically receive their *benefits*. We too have inherited the promises (e.g. you will be fruitful) but only by faith and patience do we receive what is promised (e.g. actually being fruitful).

Although we should be aware of the difference between *having* a promise and *enjoying* the things promised, the New Testament writers always use the word inheritance to refer to the fruit of the promises, rather than the promises themselves. In Hebrews 6:12 we are exhorted to exercise faith and patience so that we "inherit the promises." Strictly speaking, we inherit the promises simply by faith (when we first put our faith in Christ we are justified and become Abraham's children and therefore inherit the promises God made to him). But we only receive the things promised by persevering faith. This is the meaning of Hebrews 6:12, thus the NIV translation, "inherit what is promised" is clearer.

Salvation leads to testing which is rewarded with an oath

We notice a common pattern in the author's two examples of God swearing an oath – Abraham and the Israelites in the desert. They start with a promise. The initial faith in this promise is counted as saving faith (Abraham is declared righteous and Israel are adopted as God's children). Then there is a period of delay followed by a test which leads to an oath. Abraham passed the test and his faith was rewarded with an unchangeable oath confirming the promise. Israel in the desert failed the test and their unbelief was rewarded by an unchangeable oath barring them from the promise. The same pattern is seen with Saul who failed his test and David who passed his.⁹ This pattern still holds, which is why the New Testament writers urge their readers to persevere through tests and trials so that they will receive their reward rather than have an oath sworn against them preventing them from moving on.

The inheritance and the reward for persevering faith

Passing the test of faith and receiving God's oath confirming the promise guarantees that the blessings promised will one day be enjoyed. Abraham only saw the beginnings of this in his life (despite the promise of land, he had none in which to bury Sarah and none to pass on to his son Isaac.) Hebrews 11:10,16 tells us that Abraham received his inheritance beyond the grave. The promise was passed down to Israel in the desert, but through their disobedience they were barred from its benefits. Saul was barred. David persevered in faith and received the promised reward of peace and fruitfulness. Later kings failed in faith and were barred from the promise. Mary persevered in faith and the fruit of her womb brought blessing to the whole world. Jesus persevered and obtained the church as His inheritance.¹⁰ The writer to the Hebrews tells us that we too have this promise and asks if we will draw back, fail the test of faith and be barred from the blessings promised or persevere and inherit the reward.

It is clear that the Old Testament presents inheritance as the reward of persevering faith. If we look at every occurrence of the word "inheritance" in the New Testament we see that here too it is always associated with persevering faith and obedience. Here is a summary:

⁹ See 1 Sam 15:28-29 quoted above and Ps 89:35-37 "Once for all, I have sworn by my holiness—and I will not lie to David—that his line will continue for ever and his throne endure before me like the sun ..."

¹⁰ "I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints," (Eph 1:18)

Jesus said the meek will inherit the earth and those who leave everything for Him will inherit eternal life and those who care for their needy brethren and give to the poor will inherit the kingdom.¹¹

The word of God is able to build up the church elders so they may gain an inheritance, but the wicked will not gain this inheritance which is a reward for sanctification and sharing in Christ's suffering.¹²

We are adopted as sons and have redemption through Christ's blood. In Him we obtain an inheritance, sealed by the Holy Spirit. We need revelation to understand the hope we are called to, the riches of His inheritance in the saints. We are saved by faith without works, but are called to good works. Therefore Paul prays for us to be strengthened with power and filled with God. We should have nothing to do with evil which bars people from obtaining an inheritance.¹³

Great endurance and patience through trials is rewarded by sharing in the inheritance of the saints.¹⁴ Jesus received His inheritance as the reward for His obedience to death.¹⁵

We see that those who are saved will receive an inheritance as their reward for faithful obedience.

Inheritance and eternal life

It is easy to assume that in the New Testament inheritance means eternal life, equating it with salvation from damnation and life in heaven. But the survey above shows that if we equate the two we must conclude that salvation requires initial faith PLUS enduring faith. This is the usual interpretation of both the Arminians (who say salvation is lost where faith fails) and the Calvinists (who say that genuine saving faith produces enduring faith). However, when we recognise both a) that in the Old Testament inheritance was a reward for people who were *already* God's covenant children, and b) that the New Testament language of inheritance is based upon its Old Testament origins, then we must consider if inheritance (or at least a part of our inheritance) is separate from the granting of eternal salvation. This understanding leads to the conclusion that we obtain our inheritance in three parts:

1. Our present peace with God and assurance of eternal life which comes by simple faith alone (e.g. Rom 5:1).
2. Our present enjoyment of worldly and spiritual blessing which rewards persevering faith and obedience (e.g. 2 Pet 1:3-8).
3. Our future enjoyment of eternal blessing which rewards present persevering faith and obedience (e.g. 2 Cor 5:10).

In fact, 1Pe 1:3-7 and 3:9 make it clear that inheritance is *found* in heaven and is not simply *being* in heaven.

"... In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade— kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed... Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing."

¹¹ Matt 5:5, 19:29, 25:34, Mk 10:17,

¹² Acts 20:32, 26:18, Rom 8:17, 1 Cor 6:9, Gal 5:21 These scriptures show that inheritance is an additional blessing given to believers who live holy lives.

¹³ Eph 1:5-18, 2:8-10, 3:14-19, 5:1-7.

¹⁴ Col 1:9-12 and 3:24, Heb 6:12, 1 Peter 1:3-7 and 3:9, Rev 21:7

¹⁵ Heb 1:2-4, Isa 53:11-12

Paul makes the same point in Romans 4 in his very full treatment of Abraham's faith. In vv1-12 he argues that Abraham was justified by faith without works and that justification by faith is available to both Jews and gentiles. Then from vv 13-16 Paul argues that the promise given to Abraham is also inherited by faith. V13 is the turning point of the argument:

"It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith."

The promise came to Abraham through faith-righteousness. This shows that the *promise* he received by faith is not the same as the *righteousness* he obtained by faith. Paul's argument in these verses is that they are distinct and both are inherited by us through faith.

Then from the end of v16 to 21 Paul shows how Abraham, after many hard years of persevering faith, eventually inherited the promise.

Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." (Ro 4:18)

This is in sharp contrast to his simple justifying faith that was secure even before circumcision (v10). Paul is not contradicting himself in this passage, but showing that both justifying faith and the separate promise of inheritance are both obtained by faith, not law.

Then Paul talks about our experience of both justifying faith which brings peace with God and a present hope of glory (4:22-5:2) and persevering faith which continues through suffering to produce a future hope (v3-5).

Inheritance and the Kingdom of God

Nine times in the New Testament the kingdom of God is linked with inheritance.¹⁶ Three times the phrase clearly refers to heaven. The first is when Jesus talks about the separation of sheep and goats on judgement day. The others are:

"I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable." (1Co 15:50)

"...an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade— kept in heaven for you," (1Pe 1:4)

Especially in view of Matthew's frequent use of the phrase "kingdom of heaven" we might assume that the kingdom of God is heaven. But the phrase "kingdom of heaven" is only found in Matthew's gospel and is a euphemism for "kingdom of God" which is used in the rest of the New Testament. (The Jews, to whom Matthew addressed his gospel, were rather sensitive about using the name "God" lest they accidentally used His name in vain. Thus Matthew often substitutes "heaven" for "God" in this phrase, but it means Kingdom of God and should *not* be understood as meaning "God's kingdom in heaven.")

But when we look at Jesus' use of the phrase we see that "Kingdom of God" means God's reign starting on earth in the here and now and continuing into the next life.

"your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." (Mt 6:10)

"As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.'" (Mt 10:7)

Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you." (Lu 17:20-21)

God's kingdom has come when His will is done on earth. The kingdom is near when the gospel is preached. The kingdom of God is within us. These and many other examples show us that the kingdom of God is the realm of His reign on earth and in the hearts of men both now and in the age

¹⁶ Matt 25:34, 1Cor 6:9, 10, 1Cor 15:50, Gal 5:21, Eph 5:5, Col 1:12, James 2:5, 1Pet 1:4

to come. The phrase was not new. For generations the Jews had looked forward to the coming Messiah who would establish God's kingdom on earth. When the Pharisees questioned Jesus about entering the Kingdom of God that is what they meant, although they understood it continued beyond death and the resurrection.

The apostles understood the phrase in the same way:

... strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said. (Ac 14:22)

"For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit," (Ro 14:17)

The apostles were not teaching that heaven could only be entered through suffering or that there is no eating in heaven! Rather, they are saying that righteousness, peace and joy are for now, but they are often only obtained after suffering. They are hoped for in this life and guaranteed in the next.

So when we encounter references to inheriting the kingdom of God we should examine the context to see if the reference is to life now, or specifically to life after our death. Most occurrences are much better understood as referring to enjoying the blessings of the kingdom on earth. E.g.

"But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law. The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law." (Ga 5:18-23)

Here Paul contrasts life in the sinful nature with life in the spirit. He is talking about this life and says those living in sin will not inherit the kingdom of God. But when we look closely at his list of behaviours that prevent enjoyment of God's kingdom we see many things that were found in the New Testament church. There was discord between Paul and Barnabas and Paul had a sharp dissension with Peter. The man in Corinth who had an incestuous relationship with his father's wife was restored. Many of the churches suffered from factions and envy and some in Corinth were getting drunk during Holy Communion. Yet in none of these cases does Paul say the people concerned have lost their salvation. What he says is that Christians who live like this will not enjoy the fruit of the Spirit and the blessings of God's kingdom promises. They will not inherit the kingdom of God *on earth*, and since we know they will be judged by Christ on their death, they will also forfeit part of their potential reward in heaven.¹⁷

Thus we see that the use of the word "Kingdom" in the New Testament suggests we should link it to the idea of Abraham's inheritance, gained through persevering faith. Eternal life, the promise of heaven and sharing in the resurrection of Christ, these things are given freely to all who come with simple faith to believe in Christ as their redeemer. But entry into the Kingdom of God - enjoyment of the promises of fruitfulness and blessing, the enjoyment of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit - these things are inherited through persevering faith and sometimes much suffering. Those who shrink back or fall in to sin can not enjoy these riches. Their redemption is not undone, but they may be saved only as through fire (1Cor 3:15).

¹⁷ It is my understanding of scripture that every act of faith and obedience is rewarded (Col 3:24) and the reward once gained cannot be lost. It is beyond the reach of robbers and rust (Matt 6:20) and is kept imperishable and unfading for us (1 Pet 1:4). But every act of disobedience and unbelief loses us the potential reward of obedience and faith.

Summary of Hebrews 6

The key to understanding the chapter has been to carefully follow the argument to see how each section contributes to whole. We can now summarise the chapter, hopefully improving on the outline argument we wrote at the start.

We should move on from the basic doctrines of salvation to the much bigger picture of living as heirs of the promises given to Abraham. The cross made us heirs of those promises, but now we must work them out in our lives, lest we drift away and become fruitless. To this end we should seek out good examples to follow – from the scriptures, from church history and amongst those faithful believers we know – and we should imitate their faith so that we too live in the full blessings of the promises God gave to Abraham. Jesus intercedes for us day and night to this end.

Paul prayed for the Colossians showing very similar hopes to those we have seen in Hebrews:

“For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. ¹⁰ And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, ¹¹ being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. ¹³ For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” (Col 1:9-14)

Questions for discussion and application in Hebrews 6:9-20

- V9 What blessings have you experienced along with salvation?
- V10 In what ways do you help and serve God's people?
How do you feel when your service goes unnoticed or unappreciated?
How does this verse help to keep you motivated?
- V11-12 Who inspires you in your walk with God? Which of their qualities would you love to possess?
How can you imitate their faith?
What promises are you asking God to fulfil?
- V13-15 Are there any promises you believe God has sworn to you?
What promises are you having to find patience for?
- V19-20 What is the "anchor of your soul"? What do you cling to when you are shaken?
What does God's promise to Abraham mean for you?
Are you completely sure about God's covenant commitment to bless you and make you a blessing to others?
What does it mean to you to have Jesus as your Melchizedek High Priest?
- Is there a verse you could memorise from this chapter that would encourage you?