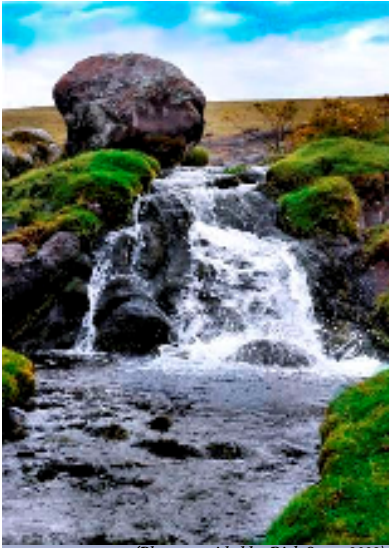


The HUMILITY and GLORY of the GREAT SHEPHERD

Part 1 - Intention

HEBREWS 6:13-20 (ESV)



(Photo provided by Rick Sams, 2009)

Pastor Russ Ramsey
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Oak Hills Presbyterian Church,
Overland Park, Kansas

Is this Real?

Are you tired and weary?
Are you thinking of bailing on what you believe, or at least on living it out? Have you already? Easter is coming, a season that asks you to believe in *and* rest upon an incredible tale of resurrection—not only Jesus' long ago, but our own in the coming age as well. Is this real to you?

This year's Easter series is set in the book of Hebrews—a letter focused on the supremacy of the Risen Christ over everything in heaven and on earth. We're going to look at the story of Easter both in terms of what took place in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago and what that means for our future hope. To do that, we're going to study both the humility and the glory of Jesus Christ, our Great Shepherd, who gave Himself up for us then and now sits at the right hand of God. Today we focus on God's intention to redeem His people through His Son.

The author of Hebrews is writing to a group of Jewish converts who are struggling with the thought of abandoning their faith. It isn't that they don't have a good foundation under them. They do. But they've begun to endure opposition and are increasingly less willing to listen to truth, lest they become known for their faith. *"You have become dull of hearing."* (Heb 5:11) So on one hand, these believers have the promises of Christ pulling on their hearts saying, *"In the midst of your struggles, look to the Lord."* But on the other they have local authorities threatening their lives, saying, *"Persist in your faith and it may cost you your head."*

How would you respond to this? How did they? Well, where they once proclaimed Christ they were now silent, afraid being known for their faith would bring more trouble than it was worth. The author pleads with this weary, fearful people to trust in their Lord Jesus, regardless of how much it feels like waiting. Do we trust God's promises? Do we believe His word, because Easter asks us to believe some pretty incredible things?

Hebrews 6:13-20

¹³When God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, ¹⁴saying, "Surely I will bless and multiply you." ¹⁵And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. ¹⁶For people

swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. ¹⁷So 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, ¹⁸so 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. ¹⁹We have this as a sure, steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, ²⁰where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

God's Unchangeable Purpose

How do we connect here and now with these words? We're prone to thoughts of walking away when life gets hard, but we all have different ideas of what "hard" looks like. What has the power to make you want to abandon your faith? Let's not pretend we're only talking about persecution here. This could be anything that, in our minds, grows big enough to eclipse the power of Christ: it can be the end of a Roman spear, a moral failure brought to light, the loss of a job or life not cooperating with our plans. We're the ones who ascribe that power.

These Hebrew Christians are asking: "On what does our faith really rest?" So the author appeals to their heritage which is established on God's promise to keep and multiply the people of Israel as His own, and His oath in Genesis 22:17, where after God stops Abraham from sacrificing Isaac He swears by the highest name available—His own—that He'll keep them forever. God's promise and His oath (*swearing under the authority of His own name for our assurance*) are the two unchangeable things the author means here. God will never deviate from His Word.

The audience of this letter are the heirs to God's promise to Abraham, and God cannot lie. His call on the lives of His people is to Himself. And though they may feel the connection is fragile, the author assures them it is not—and they only need to look to God's promise to preserve and keep His people to see it. God's oath has not been static, but always moving in the direction of, as Tolkien wrote, everything sad coming untrue.

To a people wanting to flee, the author bids them *"flee to Christ"*—their High Priest who *"went behind the curtain"*—a reference to the curtain in the temple which separated the Holy Presence of God from the people unclean in their sins. When Jesus was crucified, that curtain tore in two, (Mk 15:38) signifying Christ had bridged the separation between God and His people. When the author tells them *"flee to Christ for refuge and hold fast to the hope set before us"* in Him, it is because that refuge is sufficient to cover us and that hope strong enough to hold us.

So again, are you weary? Are you thinking of relegating your faith to a set of things you do, not a life you live? This will be a fear-filled, unsatisfying existence. God has sworn by His own name to preserve us to the end and then to bring us home to glory. Easter tells the story of this promise. Our every hope and His every promise are fulfilled in Christ. Nothing can undo this. Do you believe this? Is this your hope this Easter season?

What if God Raises the Dead?

Let me challenge you on this with a story—a true story. I hadn't been a confessing Christian for more than a couple of weeks, and while I was still uncertain of so much, I was sure of one thing—nothing in my life would be untouched by the presence of Christ in it. This isn't to say I went from struggling with sin to all of the sudden having everything under control. In fact, some of the main things I wrestled with then continue to this day. Still, I understood that walking with Christ meant everything about me would be, in one way or another, transformed.

The snow had draped everything in a pillowy blanket of white that looked like something in a Thomas Kincade painting. As a country kid, I preferred being outdoors. So when the snow stopped, I layered up, put on my boots, gloves and hat and went out to stand in the glory God had put on display. I remember it like it was yesterday. The roads were all but impassable, so I was alone. It was bitterly cold—the dry kind that freezes the lungs when you breathe. Everything was so still that the sound of my boots crunching through the surface of the snow was muted as though I were in an acoustically perfect concert hall.

I stood at the end of my driveway looking past the stand of blue spruces draped in snow to my right when out of the corner of my eye I saw something out of place. There in a 30 foot spruce I saw something amid the alternating layers of bluish-green and pure white that was the color of ash. Unable to make out what it was, I went over to investigate. It was a bird—a motionless, gray, speckled dove—nestled on a bough right at about eye-level. It wasn't until I was only inches away that I realized the bird was dead—frozen as it had landed, perfectly preserved.

With my gloved hands I picked it up and held it in such a way that if it wanted to fly away, it could. I thought about the Bible verses that say God knows the number of hairs on our heads, (Mt 10:30) how we are fearfully and wonderfully made, (Ps 139:14) how the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, (Ps 24:1) and how God cares for the birds of the field. (Mt 6:26) I thought of this bird and though it weighed next to nothing, it was all at once heavy in my hands. *This was God's bird.* He made it. He was there when it poked its little beak out of its little shell. He aligned its DNA to produce feathers. He gave it instincts to find food. He gave it flight. And He numbered its days—a number now expired.

I found myself caring for the little creature, even grieving a bit. I couldn't shake the thought that in ways I couldn't comprehend God loved that lifeless little bird. So I prayed. It started as a prayer of thanks for creation and for God's attention to detail. But before I knew it, I was praying for that bird. Lifting it up like a priest with his offering, I prayed, *"God of all Creation, You gave this bird life and You have cared for it all its days. Now it is dead, but if You wanted, You could bring it back to life, right here and now. It would take nothing—just a word. Not even. If it be Your will, raise this little bird up and give it new life."* And then I studied the bird.

What ending to this story are you comfortable with? Knowing I promise this story is true, how do you hope it ends? Is there a part of you pleading, *"Please don't tell me the bird came back to life. I don't know if I have a category for that, other than doubt."* If I told you the bird awoke in my hands and flew away to God knows where, would you be okay? If I promised you I had no intentions of taking a shred of credit for it, and swore I'd recoil at even the slightest hint that I was in any way a healer, would it then be okay if I told you God raised that bird from the dead?

How you answer matters, because if you are a Christian, all your eggs (*no pun intended*) are in the basket of belief in the resurrection of the dead—not only in Jesus' resurrection, but in your own as well. Jesus Himself said, *"This is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."* (John 6:40) So what is harder to believe: that God can raise a bird from the dead, or that He Himself has risen, and that He will also raise you?

How the Story is Going to End

Does the bird take flight? How does the story end? You want to know. Some of you might even say you *need* to know. For the next two weeks we are going to see the humility and glory of Christ, our Great Shepherd, from the beginning and end of the Book of Hebrews. It is a letter written after the end of one part of the story of redemption—the resurrection of Christ—with an eye toward the final chapter—the triumphant return of the King of Glory. And it is in every way the story of the dead being given new life—eternal life. This is the unchangeable purpose of God for those who'd believe on Him—resurrection.

Whether the bird rose to newness of life or not, if you are in Christ, the guarantee of the Gospel is that you will. He will scoop you up, cold and still, and warm your Spirit to flight. How can I say such a thing of the followers of Jesus? Scripture says it. *"If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you."* (Rom 8:11)

Easter is a time for us to remember that we know how the story will end. In Jerusalem 2,000 years ago, we saw the first fruits of the resurrection. And it is a **TRUE** story: *"IN FACT Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead."* (1 Cor 15:20-21) It is not a promise I make to you, but one God Himself has already made. And He has sworn by the greatest name in Heaven and on Earth—His own. This is God's promise, and *"it is impossible for God to lie."* (Heb 6:18)

Easter is not merely an historical event to remember. It is the declaration of God's intent. Jesus Christ rose in victory over the grave and means to raise His people too. Easter is the guarantee that the story of the follower of Jesus ends in resurrection—eternity in face-to-face intimacy with the Lover of our souls. *"We have this as a sure, steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf... high priest forever."* (Heb 6:19-20)

Death has long since been defeated. Still, we wait with baited breath for the end to come. But make no mistake. If you are in Christ, you already know what the end will be—resurrection. May your celebration of Easter be marked by your worship of the Risen Lord, Jesus Christ, our eternal Great High Priest.

Notes