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Hebrews #17

### Experiencing the Full Assurance of Hope Hebrews 6:9-12

There is no way to exaggerate or overestimate what you could achieve by the grace of God if you were living in the full assurance of your hope in Christ. There is no way to exaggerate or overestimate how deeply you could enjoy the blessings of being a child of God if you were living in the full assurance of your hope in Christ. Let me turn that around and say the same thing in different terms. *God wants you to know that you belong to him. His desire is for every one of his blood-bought children to be gripped and captivated by the certainty of the hope we have in Jesus.* He wants you to *rest* in the full assurance of that hope so that you will live out of the overflow of his love for you. He wants you to *rejoice* in the assurance of that hope so that you can be both holy and happy in Christ.

Nothing cripples Christian zeal and joy quite like fear, anxiety, and uncertainty regarding your relationship to God. When you get up each day wondering whether or not God really loves you and is for you, it's hard to find the passion and strength to resist temptation and to live wholeheartedly for Jesus. When your mind is filled with doubts about whether or not God even likes you . . . when your heart is riddled with fear that there might not even *be* a God who could like or love you . . . when you wonder if he'll continue to put up with you . . . when you obsess over whether or not the promises you read about in Scripture are really yours and will actually come to fruition . . . the Christian life becomes very burdensome and unappealing.

But when your heart is filled to overflowing with the rock solid assurance that your hope will not disappoint and that your relationship with God is unshakably certain, there is no limit to the joy and satisfaction and spiritual success that you can experience.

That's what the author of this letter to the Hebrews is saying to us here in 6:9-12. Now, all that may sound strange to those of you who were here last week and paid attention to what was said in 6:4-8. There we read a very sobering assessment of a certain sort of people who have tasted and seen and learned much of Christianity but fall short of entering into the fullness of salvation. There our author spoke of men and women who eventually walk away from Jesus Christ and put themselves beyond the hope of repentance. The warning he issued to such people was serious and sobering.

But he doesn't want that to undermine the assurance of salvation on the part of those truly know Christ. Similarly, if I thought that my message last week on Hebrews 6:4-8 had contributed to making some of you who are saved fear that you are not, I would be very, very sad. If I thought that this passage had been read and interpreted in such a way that you felt your hope slipping away and the assurance of your salvation being undermined, I would be very, very sad.

The aim of Hebrews 6:4-8, and thus the goal of my message, is not to cause those who are truly saved to be fearful that they aren't. Its aim is to cause those who are *not* truly saved but *think they are* to repent. There are a lot of people who are truly and eternally saved who live in fear that they aren't. And there are probably even more people who are not truly and eternally saved who live in the false belief that they are. Hebrews 6 is written to the latter group. So again, Hebrews 6:4-8 is not designed to undermine the confident hope and assurance of salvation in those who have truly been born again. It is rather designed to warn and sound an alarm to those who haven't been born again but presumptuously think they have.

The author of Hebrews knows that the sort of language he used and the warning he issued about such people might create undue anxiety in the hearts of those he is confident really know Christ. So he says this in v. 9 – *“Though we speak in this way [that is, in the way just stated in vv. 4-8], yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things – things that belong to salvation.”*

Clearly he believed that most to whom he is writing this letter were born again. “We feel sure,” he writes, “that you are truly saved.” As if to reinforce his confidence in them, he refers to them as *“beloved,”* the only place in the entire letter where this term appears. In other words, they are “beloved” not only by God but also by him.

That word “beloved” is important, so let me briefly pause to say something about it. Curt Flood, an excellent baseball player for the St. Louis Cardinals in the sixties, like Jackie Robinson, was one of the first African-American men to play in the big leagues. He endured unbelievable racist venom. The names he was called are simply unrepeatable. At one point, Flood said: “I’m happy God made my skin black. I only wish he hadn’t made it so thin.”

Well, although it has nothing to do with race or ethnicity, *Christians ought not to be thin-skinned*. We, dear friend, are “beloved” of God: chosen by God before the foundation of the world, redeemed by the Son of God, reconciled to God, adopted into the family of God, and indwelt by the Spirit of God. There is absolutely no reason why we should feel threatened or vulnerable or insecure. No matter what anyone says to you, about you, or does in an attempt to destroy you, you are beloved of God! *We should be the least self-defensive people in the world.* Say what you will about me: God loves me! Criticize me if you wish: God loves me! I will not take offense at anything: God loves me!

*But how can we know for sure? (v. 10)*

But how does he *know* they are beloved and saved? Where does this confidence come from? How can he be so sure? The answer is found in v. 10, one of the most important texts in all of Hebrews: “For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do.” This is such an important text that we need to slow down and unpack it line upon line. Let me direct your attention to several crucial truths here.

**First**, our author has confidence in their spiritual condition because of the *love* these people have for God's name. *God is supreme and central in their affections*. Their first and foundational passion is that God would be glorified. To love God's name is to love it when he is affirmed and he is extolled and his beauty and honor are seen by all. To love God's name is to rejoice when all the attention turns to him and all the credit for everything good goes to him. This is our author's way of saying that these people are *God-entranced, God-besotted, and God-absorbed*. They are determined that God be preeminent in all things, no exceptions allowed.

**Second**, it would be *unjust* of God to overlook this devotion to the glory and supremacy of his name. Don't get confused by this word "unjust." He doesn't mean it would be "unjust" in the sense that we do God a favor by serving his people, putting him in our debt so that he is in some sense *obligated* in turn to pay us back by remembering and making much of what we've done.

No! Never! *It is not the worth of our work but the worth of God's name that stirs him never to forget*. When our primary motivation in all we do is to honor God's name, it becomes for him a matter of justice or righteousness to take note of it. Why, you ask? Why would it not instead be a display of unimaginable egotism and self-centeredness for God to be so concerned about his own name? If you and I were obsessed with the fame of our name we would justifiably be charged with arrogance and pride and egotism. So how does God escape the same accusation?

The answer is: *he's God!* Let me put it this way. The essence of righteousness and goodness is that a person be devoted to whatever is the best and purest and most beautiful and most worthy thing in the universe. And what might that "thing" be? God, of course! God is himself the best and purest and most glorious and most worthy being in all the world. Therefore, if God is himself going to be righteous he must, of necessity, be committed above all else to the glory and praise of his own name. For God *not* to love and honor his own name above all else would be for him to commit idolatry. *God must love God preeminently*. It is only just and right that he do so, because he is God. It would be unjust and wrong for us to love and honor our own names above all else because we *aren't* God. That is why it is a matter of "justice" or "righteousness" for God to take note of those who love his name.

**Third**, precisely how did their love for God's name manifest itself? How might *we* know whether or not *we* really love God and adore his name and are committed to his glory? The answer is given in v. 10. *It is seen in the "work" that we do "in serving the saints."* Now, several things must be said about this remarkable statement.

(1) Our enemy, the Devil, wants us to think that we have here an "either/or" proposition. Either we love God and are wholly devoted to him, or we love people and are wholly devoted to them. And sadly that is how it often is seen in many churches.

Some churches are so utterly *vertical* in their orientation, so entirely God-centered, that they ignore the needs of hurting people. They justify their casual oversight of hurting

souls by saying: “Well, our sole and exclusive calling in life is to magnify God and to love him. We are so enthralled with God that we don’t have time to bother with mere humans.”

Other churches tend to the opposite extreme. Their focus is entirely *horizontal*. As far as they are concerned, serving the needs of people is the only thing that matters. For them, loving God **is** loving other people. The primary call of the church, so they say, is humanitarian in its focus.

Some, then, feed and clothe the poor and find housing for the homeless and assume that this is identical to loving God. Others worship God and extol God and pray and preach the Word and assume that a concern for people would distract them from what is of greatest importance.

And both groups are wrong. When Jesus was asked which was the greatest commandment in the law, he responded by saying: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matt. 27:37). But he didn’t stop there. He proceeded to mention the second great commandment: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 27:39).

The point is, don’t allow your devotion to God to collapse into serving people. And don’t allow your love for people to cloud or supersede your devotion to God. ***We must hallow God’s name and help God’s people. We must savor God’s glory and serve God’s saints*** (John Piper).

(2) ***We serve God’s people for the sake of God’s name, not the other way around.*** God’s name is first and foremost in our hearts, and one of the primary ways in which people will know that we love God and in turn honor and praise him is when they see us show compassion toward the broken and helpless. Our desire is for Bridgeway to be a church where all of our people serve all of our people. We want to be a church of compassion and love for one another. And we also want to be a God-centered church, a church where the name of God as revealed in Jesus is exalted and extolled above all else. And you can’t have one of these without the other!

Every time you love our children by serving in the nursery, ***God remembers!*** He will not overlook the love you have for him as seen in your love for his little ones! Every time you speak a word of encouragement to someone who is discouraged, ***God remembers!*** Every time you take a meal to someone who can’t provide for himself, ***God remembers!*** Every time you clean the house of someone who is physically unable to do so, ***God remembers!*** ***God sees all that you do for others for the sake of his name, and he remembers!*** He will not “overlook” your prayers for one another or your words of affirmation or your sacrificial giving to one another.

(3) The third observation I want to make concerning this passage is what it tells us about how we can have confidence that we really know God in a saving way. Note carefully that these people didn't simply work hard and love other Christians in the past. They **"still do"** (v. 10b)! Their love for God's people wasn't a one-off act of compassion. It wasn't a momentary or passing commitment. They have persevered in this loving and sacrificial service. This was their habit, their custom, their daily routine. This confirms what we've seen repeatedly in Hebrews: the evidence of genuine saving faith in Christ is perseverance and endurance in holiness of life and in bearing by God's grace the fruit of the Spirit.

(4) I fear that some of you are trying to serve and love the saints out of something other than a devotion to God's name and glory. You feel some humanitarian impulse. You are moved in pity for people who hurt. And that's ok, as far as it goes. But your devotion to the welfare of other people must flow out of devotion to God, or you will eventually burn out. ***Service for others must come out of the abundant overflow of your satisfaction with God.*** We must start from a foundation of love for God and satisfaction in God and fascination with God and, from that, love and serve his people.

So, one more time, how does the justice of God give us confidence that we are truly saved? Evidently, in this way: when God promises never to overlook our ministry to others and our love for them, it moves him to work in our hearts all the more to preserve us and protect us and keep us safe in faith.

*Earnest for full assurance of hope (v. 11)*

Earlier I said that ***God wants you to know that you belong to him. His desire is for every one of his blood-bought children to be gripped and captivated by the certainty of the hope we have in Jesus and to rejoice in it.*** And here's why we know that it is true. It comes from what we read in v. 11 – "And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end" (v. 11).

It's as if our author says, "You showed great zeal and commitment in your devotion to God's name by serving his people. Now show the same zeal and earnestness in pursuit of the full assurance of hope." I want to highlight three things.

**First**, growing in the assurance that your hope is sure and solid *does not come automatically*. You must be "earnest" or "zealous" in the pursuit of it. And it typically comes in two ways. *First*, it comes from reflecting and meditating on the glorious truths already set forth about Jesus in this letter: his sinless life in facing all the temptations we face, his atoning death in our place, and his role as our great high priest, just to mention a few. *Second*, it comes from being diligent by God's grace to believe his promises and trust his word and to work and serve the saints by loving them. In other words, assurance is grounded primarily in the objective achievement of Jesus himself

and secondarily in our transformed lives as we seek to live for his glory and the good of his people.

But let's be certain we know what "hope" is, and also what it isn't.

The psalmist preaches to himself, declaring: "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God" (Ps. 42:5). His point is that **hope is not natural or instinctive to the human heart**. We must preach it to ourselves and constantly remind ourselves that God is trustworthy and will fulfill his promises. "Come on soul! Get with it! Believe God! Know that he will never fail to come through for you."

Hope, by the way, is far and away different from *wishing for the best*. Let me remind you of a scene early on in the movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*, starring Jimmy Stewart? His character, George Bailey, walks into the local drug store. He flicks what appears to be a lighter in the shape of an animal. Before he does, he crosses his fingers, closes his eyes, and says: "I wish I had a million bucks!" The flame lights up and he yells, "Hot dog!"

Is that what "hope" is? Is it the same thing that happened in your heart when you said, prior to Game Six of the NBA playoffs: "I sure *hope* the Thunder win tonight"? Is biblical "hope" always characterized by *uncertainty and doubt*, as if it were little more than wishful thinking? Is hope little more than a "desire" for something good in the future that deep down inside you know probably will never come to pass? NO!

Biblical hope is the **confident expectation** that what we want to come to pass will in point of fact undoubtedly come to pass! There is a spiritual and moral certainty in biblical hope because what we expect to see and experience and enjoy in the future is something God himself has promised he will bring to pass. Hope is rock solid and unshakable because it is rooted and grounded in the faithfulness of God.

[Of course, merely hoping for something is not what makes it certain to occur. God's promise does that. If God hasn't promised it, not all the hope in the world will make it come to pass. Likewise, our failure to hope for something does not undermine or destroy its certainty. It simply undermines our capacity to enjoy what God has said he will do.]

**How, then, does "hope" differ from "faith"?** Well, hope is something of a subset of faith. Hope is that expression of faith that focuses on the *future*. Faith typically looks to the past and the present and says, "I believe what God has already done and has already said." Hope typically looks to the future and says, "I trust that what he has promised, based on what he has done in the past, he will in fact bring about." As John Piper has said, **"hope is faith in the future tense."**

*How Hope Subverts Sluggishness (v. 12)*

Now what I want you to see is the relationship of full assurance of hope to being energetic and passionate so that through faith and patience we might inherit the promises. Do you see the cause and effect progression here in vv. 11-12?

Being fully assured that God is for you and that you belong to him is what will energize your heart so that you won't be sluggish and spiritually lazy and just coast through the Christian life. The joy that comes from the rock-solid assurance that God has destined me for an eternity with him will guard me from becoming presumptuous and arrogant and slothful. Being fully assured that God is your God and that his promises can be trusted is what will sustain faith and patience in your heart as you wait for the promises of God to come to pass.

Again, don't miss the connection between being fully assured of the solidity and certainty of your hope, on the one hand, and your determination not to be sluggish or slothful but to energetically imitate the faith and patience of believers who've gone before you, on the other. The former is the cause and the latter the effect.

***Don't ever think that the Christian life does not require effort.*** It is always God-empowered effort. God is beneath and behind all we strive to do, but strive we must. We must be "earnest" in the cultivation of confidence in our hope "so that" we won't be lazy and negligent when it comes to living lives of "faith and patience."

We talk so much about the importance of "faith" in the Christian life that I fear we've tuned it out when it comes up in biblical texts like this. We dial down the volume of God's Word when the subject of "faith" comes up because we've heard it so many times before. It seems so basic and foundational and natural to the Christian that we simply don't give it much time or thought. And that would be a tragic mistake!

The greatest battle that you face every day, the most dangerous threat that comes your way from Satan, the most alluring temptation of your flesh, is to stop believing God, stop trusting God, stop hoping in God. Or worse still, just start taking God for granted and coast into your inheritance of the promises. No! We will inherit all that God has promised, not independently of faith, but precisely through it and by means of it.

And that, dear friend, is one of the primary things that Jesus does for us as our great high priest. He stands ever present and always powerful to sustain within us a heart that treasures God and trusts God and grows in the assurance that our hope in God will never fail.

### *Conclusion*

John Paul Sartre, the famous French existentialist and atheist, once said:

“Man can count on no one but himself. He is alone, abandoned on earth in the midst of his infinite responsibilities, without hope, with no other aim than the one he sets for himself, with no other destiny than the one he forges for himself on this earth.”

My prayer is that you would reject such cynical and destructive counsel, and embrace the perspective of the psalmist who declared:

“Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those whose who *hope* in his steadfast love” (Ps. 33:18).

And again:

“For you, O Lord, are my *hope*, my trust, O Lord, from my youth” (Ps. 71:5).

And again:

“Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose *hope* is in the Lord his God” (Ps. 146:5).

So let me close by reminding us all one more time how crucial it is to preach this truth to our own hearts. Don't merely rely upon me to preach it to you on Sunday morning. Preach it to yourself:

“Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? *Hope in God*; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God” (Ps. 42:5).