Soul Anchor
Hebrews 6:13-20

Our young people are not short of role models, are they? Our celebrity culture bombards us with the lives of the rich and the famous as if what they have is the life that we should all aspire to: they're the top, they've made it, and if only we were so lucky to be like them. So we're not short of role models and people to imitate – they're just the wrong kind.

Well the writer of this letter is writing to his friends, who have become Christians out of a Jewish background. And he's writing to them because life is hard for them and some of them are on the verge of throwing their faith away and going back to Judaism and the synagogue, because there was at least some safety from persecution there. And he's been urging them not to do that, telling them that Jesus is greater than angels, greater than Moses, greater than Joshua and he's begun to tell them that he's even greater than Aaron the archetypal Jewish high priest.

But then, as we've seen, he takes a deliberate detour. He's got lots he wants to tell them about Jesus being a high priest, but before he can get there, he challenges them about their immaturity, and warns them, as we saw a couple of weeks ago, of the danger of falling away, so steer clear of the cliff edge.

But he finishes his warning by encouraging them, and telling them that rather than being sluggish in their faith, they should, v12, be 'imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.' They need a role model. Facing what they are facing, they need someone they can imitate, and aspire to be like.

And the example he gives them, the role model of someone who through faith and patience has inherited the promises, is Abraham. But why Abraham? I mean the writer has countless other Bible characters he could have drawn on. He could have urged them to be as courageous as Samson, as brave as Daniel, as fearless as Esther. But he doesn't, he picks Abraham. Now, why is that? Why pick an old man, from hundreds of years back, as someone these Christians under persecution in Rome should imitate?

Four points: Faith under fire; the problem of patience; the search for security; Soul anchor

Faith under Fire
V13-14: 'For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, "Surely I will bless you and multiply you."'

Now, what's interesting about that is that the writer is quoting Genesis, the first book of the Bible, when God makes a promise to Abraham, that from him descendants will come and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. And yet, the writer doesn't use the first time God makes that promise to Abraham. He could have, and he could have said – look, have Abraham as your example, a man who against all the odds, even though he was old and his wife was old, believed that God could give him a son, and he did, and you just have to have faith.

But he doesn't. The verse he's quoting here comes from Genesis 22. And Abraham's son Isaac has already been born, and God tells Abraham in 22v2, to "take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering."

And if you know the story, you'll know that Abraham obeys God and takes his son, and the wood for the fire, and climbs the mountain. And as they are going up, Isaac asks his dad, 'Dad, you've got wood and you've got fire, and you've got your knife, but where's the sacrifice Dad? You haven't got a lamb.' And Abraham replied (22:8), 'God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.'

And when they get to the top, Abraham binds Isaac and is just about to sacrifice him, and he has the knife above his head, when God intervenes and stops him, and he looks up, and there's a ram caught in the thicket.

And God says to Abraham, in v16-18: "By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed."

Now just put yourself in Abraham's shoes for a moment. Because that's what the writer wants his friends to do. What must have been going through Abraham's mind when God told him to do what he told him to do? What must have been going through his mind as he made that long, slow climb to the top with his son? This is the boy that God had promised him. Abraham had waited 25 years for Isaac to be born. This was the boy in whom all his hopes and dreams lay. This was the boy through whom God had said he would build a family and bless the world. And now God is telling me to sacrifice him? That makes no sense. God, you make no sense. That's not the kind of God I thought I was serving.

You see, it wasn't just that Abraham was being asked to exercise his faith. His very faith *itself* was under fire. All that he had come to believe about God and his plans and his purposes was on trial here. And that's why the writer picks Abraham and this moment in the life of Abraham as their example that they can imitate in what they are going through. Because just like them, Abraham, the father of faith, had to go through his own severe trial of faith, his own trial of 'can I really trust God with what is most precious to me?' Because their lives are at risk, and the lives of their loved ones are at risk and just like them, Abraham had to learn, step by step, to trust God even when it seemed counter-intuitive; even when it seemed what God was asking was too much and the cost was way too high. He had to learn to trust when his trust was stretched to the limit, when the previous promises of God seemed most at risk, when God's purposes seemed so incomprehensible. Abraham, just like the writer's friends, had to learn to trust, even when God's character and faithfulness seemed most in doubt.

And that's why he picks this moment – because for them and for you and me, there are times when God just does not seem to make sense, and what he is

taking us through doesn't seem to make sense, and it looks as if all the plans and promises and purposes of God are turning to dust.

But in just such a moment, Abraham did trust God – and found him to be absolutely trustworthy even, especially, in the moment of trial. And yet, this isn't really about Abraham's great faith. It's about God's great faithfulness. And when life is hard, and your faith is under fire, and stretched to breaking point, you can imitate Abraham, because your God is the same God.

And God uses this moment of trial to restate his promise to Abraham. But he does more than just restate it, the writer tells us that God swore by himself. Now when you take an oath, what you're doing is pledging yourself, by something or someone greater than you. You're word on its own may not carry enough weight, so by swearing on oath you are bringing all the authority and trustworthiness of this other person to your side. So, when you're called as a witness in court, you may be asked to put your hand on the bible and take the oath. Or when you get married, the minister tells you you're making your vows and promises before God and before the congregation. Now for you and me it's not hard to find someone higher than us to swear by. When I was a medical consultant in the NHS, my mother thought I was at the top of the pile and could go round telling her friends all about me. But now I'm a pastor I'm at the bottom of the pile and my mother is strangely silent. It's not hard to find someone above a pastor.

But with God, there is no one greater, there is no one above, there is no higher authority who can be called upon to vouch for his word. And so the writer tells us that to confirm the promise to Abraham, God swore by himself. V16, 'For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. 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.'

Now look at what the writer says there. God didn't swear by himself for his own benefit. He didn't say to Abraham, 'you know what, I know my word and my promise are a bit suspect so here's what I'll do, I swear to you I'm telling the truth.' No – it wasn't for God's benefit. It was for the benefit of the heirs of the promise to Abraham – it was for the benefit of these Jewish Christians under pressure in Rome, it was for your and my benefit when our faith is under fire. God's word doesn't need an oath, it's us who need it, because we wobble – so he gives it. It is God saying, look, my word is absolutely trustworthy, and I'm making you a promise, but more than that, I swear to you that I will keep the promise. So, the writer says in v18, that 'by two unchangeable things [God's promise and his oath] in which it is impossible for God to lie' – they stand on the rock solid ground of his character, we can know that his purposes towards us are good: that just as he doesn't change, so his purposes don't change, even when our faith is under fire.

And yet, if we are honest with ourselves, we struggle with the waiting, don't we? We struggle with waiting for God to intervene and sort things on our behalf.

The Problem of Patience
In v 12, the writer says that he wants his friends to imitate 'those who through faith *and patience* inherit the promises.' And then in v15, he writes, 'And thus Abraham, having *patiently waited*, obtained the promise.'

Abraham and his wife Sarah, had to wait 25 years before they began to see the fulfillment of the promise God had made to them. And that's a lot of waiting. And when God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, and Abraham trusted God to provide the lamb in his place, he still had to wait for God to do that – he still had to climb the hill, and lay the wood, and bind his son. In fact God took him to the point of having to lift the knife over his head before he provided the way out.

Now when you and I are in the middle of a trial and our faith is being tested to the limit, in the intensity of it all, it can feel like it's going on forever. And we want it over and done with now. We want the answer now, we want the solution now, we want deliverance now. We are the instant generation, aren't we? And waiting is just alien to us.

And when we do have to wait, we are anything but patient. We fret and we worry. We're like a soon-to-be father, pacing the floor outside the delivery room unable to sit down. It's why patience is one of the fruit of the Spirit: we need Him to produce it in our lives, because we have such a hard time producing it ourselves. Many of us are great in activity – give us a problem and we'll solve it. We thrive in the action, when we're busy and everything needs juggling. But waiting? And waiting for someone else – waiting for God to deliver and come up with the goods? That we are not so good at.

But why is that? Why the problem with patience and patiently waiting when things aren't as we want them to be? Well, at least in part, it comes down to what you are looking for.

The Search for Security
We struggle with waiting because we want things sown up, we want things nailed down, we want things sorted. We're looking for and longing for security. Now, you may think – 'hmm I'm not so sure Martin, actually I'm quite happy with things being up in the air, I'm happy being free and spontaneous.' And you may be, but if your freedom to do as you want is curtailed and you feel trapped, then you'll struggle soon enough, because you find security and safety in being in control and you calling the shots rather than someone else.

And we can look for security in ourselves, in our ability to control events, or we can look for it in something or someone outside of ourselves. For example, you might seek the security of a relationship – you need to know that you are loved and cherished – and when you are, you feel safe. Or you might find security in material things and wealth – you're ok if you know you have this financial buffer, if there's enough money in the bank, or the investments are performing. You might find security in your family, or community, or even your culture: life is good and things are ok when all these things are in place.

And the reason we can have a hard time waiting is if these things that we are looking to for security are threatened, or a long time in coming, then we can feel unstable and at risk and so we want them sorted.

Now, there's nothing wrong with that need for inner security. The problem is, where we look for it. You see, so much of what we look to and invest our security in could be gone in a moment: relationships break up; loved ones die; stock markets fall. We need something far more enduring if we are to know real inner security and peace, especially a security that can stand a time of trial.

And it's in the context of these first century Christians, who are longing for security and safety from oppression, that the writer says, v18, 'so that by two unchangeable things [God's promise and God's oath], 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.'

You see, ultimate security doesn't come either from within ourselves and us being in control, or from outside ourselves in things that are passing. The writer says, look, ultimate security, *the* place of refuge, comes from the Lord. And when you know that – you can find strong encouragement, not just encouragement, or weak encouragement, but the strong stuff, you can find strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before you, even when your faith is under fire.

Soul Anchor

And the picture that the writer uses is of a ship's anchor: v19, 'we have this [this future hope] as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul.' Now, why do you need an anchor for the soul? Why do you need something to stop soul-drift? Because life is hard, and as these guys are experiencing, storms come. And the danger is that if we seek our security in something or someone other than God, it's like dropping your anchor into slimy mud – there's no grip, there's no bite. Seek your security and well being in relationships or career or money or status and your anchor can drag, and potentially it will drag when you most need it - in the storm. But if you look to God as your security, even in the waiting, and maintain your hope in him that he is working out his purposes for your good, then you will have a sure and steadfast anchor, an inner security that won't drag, because he never changes.

But just ask yourself, how can you trust that? Why invest your security in Christ and the Christian faith? Why not, as some of the writer's friends were considering, look elsewhere? Why Jesus, and not any number of other contenders?

Well, look at what the writer says in v19-20: 'We have this [hope] as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, 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 forever after the order of Melchizedek.'

And the writer switches his metaphor from ships needing an anchor in the storms, to the temple and he's back on the theme of Jesus as High Priest. You see,

the reason that Jesus is the one you can trust, the one in whom you can find your ultimate security, is that it's him and only him who can bring us safely into God's presence.

In the temple, the curtain divided the first room, the Holy Place, where the priests could go every day, from the most holy place, what the writer here calls the inner place. And into that room only the High Priest could go, and that only once a year, when he took the blood of a sacrificial animal, and made atonement for the sins of the people.

But the writer says that Jesus has entered that inner place, where God is, as our forerunner, as the advance guard, as the first of many, and we can know this future, eternal hope, that God is working everything out for our good, this deep inner security, this anchor of our soul, because Christ has gone before us.

But again, ask yourself, what does he mean by Jesus entering the Most Holy Place, and why should that give you any security when life is hard? Well, Jesus hasn't entered the Most Holy Place by offering the blood of an animal as all the other high priests did, but by offering himself at the cross as the ultimate sacrifice of atonement, as he paid the debt for your sins and my sins.

You see, when God told Abraham to sacrifice his one and only son, the son whom Abraham loved, God was always going to provide a lamb for the sacrifice. And though Abraham's test was real and, figuratively speaking, he did offer up Isaac, still Abraham walked back down that hill with his son alive.

But out of his great love for you, God gave his one and only son for you. Jesus walked up the hill at Calvary, with the wood of the cross on his back and he didn't walk back down alive. Because of his love for you, Christ became the lamb that God would provide for himself, for you and for me. And that is the ground of our hope in times of trial – it's the ground of hope for these Jewish Christians facing persecution, it's the ground of hope in whatever situation you find yourself now or in the future. In the words of Paul, in Romans 8:32, 'He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?'

You can trust him, you can make Christ the anchor of your soul, you can find him your ultimate security, because of the promise of his word, because he swears by himself to keep that promise, because he can never lie, but ultimately because God loves you enough to give his Son, his only son, whom he loves, to die in your place, to bring you to himself. And if God loves you to that degree, and he does, then you know that whatever you are facing, he will work it for your good. That, as the writer puts it in v17, 'the unchangeable character of his purpose' through Abraham, to save you and to bless you, is guaranteed by Jesus.

Now, in the words of Paul (Romans 15:13) – 'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.'