

**God's oath of mercy**

- *Completes a covenant*

Since Hebrews 5:11 our writer has been speaking of the danger that his Hebrew Christian friends might become sluggish and unbelieving. The most terrifying possibility is that they might 'fail' when God takes an oath of wrath and no further progress in their lives would be possible. But on the other side there is something much more attractive. Abraham experienced not an oath of God's anger but God's oath of mercy. <sup>13</sup>*For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself,* <sup>14</sup>*saying, 'Surely I will bless you and multiply you.'* At the heart of every covenant is an oath. 'Covenant' and 'oath' are identical ideas. No covenant is anywhere near complete until an oath is taken. Abraham was given various promises. God promised Abraham would be the father of a 'seed'. He would be enabled to have a son. A land would be given to his descendants. A Saviour would come. Blessing would come to Abraham and through Abraham.

- *Four ingredients of God's promise to Abraham*

These are basically the same promises God gives to us! We are children of Abraham. There are really four ingredients, (i) achievement for God, (ii) enablement, (iii) personal reward, (iv) numerical increase. We are to be involved in the same promises that God gave to Abraham. The story of the growth of Abraham's seed is not finished. It is still continuing and we are to be involved in it.

- *Began in Genesis 12*

The promises of God to Abraham began in Genesis 12:1–3. God often renewed them (Genesis 13:15; 15:5, 18; 17:7–8, 15–16, 21; 18:18–19; 21:12). But the oath did not come until Genesis 22:15–18.

- *Repeated*

Then the angel of Yahweh called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, '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, because you have obeyed my voice.'

- *Oath in Genesis 22*

**Promises and oaths are different**

- *Promises are conditional*

**The difference between a promise and an oath is an important matter.** (i) The promises are conditional. They are inherited by faith and patience. The oath is unconditional once it has been given. (ii) So we might say the promise is open-ended. When the oath is given the situation closes down; something is decided and cannot be changed. (iii) The promise can be lost before the oath is given; it cannot be lost after the oath is given. Salvation is **already** the subject of an oath. This is why it cannot be lost. The priesthood of Jesus is already the subject of an oath. This is why it cannot cease. This is the point of Hebrews 7:20–21. Our inheritance is on offer. It is promised to us. It is **secured** when God takes an oath about it.

- *Oaths are secured*

- *A lifetime of diligent faith*

Abraham had to live a lifetime of diligent faith. He responded in faith to God's call. But sometimes he had doubts and difficulties. Finally there was a great test. 'God tested Abraham... "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 on one of the

mountains of which I shall tell you”<sup>1</sup>. Abraham passed the test and obeyed God in persistent faith. Then the oath was given to him as a reward.

22:1-2

• *Secured*

Hebrews 6:13 refers not to the early promises of Genesis 12–21 but to the promises being confirmed by oath in Genesis 22. He swore by himself. He said in effect, ‘As surely as I am God, I will do this for you.’ At that point the promise was secured in a way that could not be lost.

• *It all took time*

It all took time. <sup>15</sup>*And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise.* ‘Obtaining’ the promise means getting the promise fully secure in the taking of an oath. It is the same as ‘entering into rest’. Abraham had to go on and on believing – despite delay, despite his increasing old age and weakness, despite the opposition that came from the surrounding Canaanites. But then the day came when God took an oath and at that point the promise was securely ‘obtained’. You **have** a promise when you know about it. You **obtain** a promise when God takes an oath of mercy.

• *Oaths are legally established and irreversible*

The Christian is to live for the day when God takes oaths, and promises are obtained. Verse 16 explains how it worked out in the life of Abraham: *For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath fully and finally confirms what is said.* ‘The oath proves that what they say is true, and this ends all arguing’ (NCV). It should silence all doubts and brings an end to any possibility of defeat. This is why it is identical to ‘entering into rest’. A promise might be casually given. The person receiving the promise might fail to take advantage of it. But an oath makes the matter legally established. Nothing can change it. When God swears in wrath a situation is lost and cannot be regained. When God swears in mercy blessing is obtained which cannot be lost. So we are to live for the day when God swears in mercy and we obtain the promise. It is the day when God ‘makes up his mind’ and resolves to give us what he has promised, because he sees we have fulfilled the conditions of faith and patience. The promise is fully and finally obtained.

• *The promise was fully and finally obtained*

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