**Doubting Castle**

Text Hebrews 6:13-20

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Genesis 15:8-21; 22:15-18; Hebrews 6:4-20

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 204, 62, 65, 461, 525

**Series:** The Pilgrims Progress (#10)

**Theme:** The permanence and trustworthiness of God’s covenant promises.

**Proposition:** The way out of doubt and despair is hope in the unfailing promises of God.

**Introduction**

I have spent precious time over the years of my pastoral ministry with many Christians as they approach the end of their lives on this earth. For me, it has been an immense privilege for me to witness faith in the most intimate setting of a saint’s death bed where a brother or sister is approaching their promotion to glory in a room with just the two of us. I have sometimes seen gloriously strong faith revealed in these situations, but also at times, I have seen great anguish of soul and I have heard deeply introspective questions like:

* Have I borne sufficient fruit of the Spirit in my life?
* Is my faith strong enough now that I am very close to death?
* Have I confessed and repented of my sins sufficiently?
* Have I read and studied the Bible enough? prayed enough?
* Didn’t Christ say that there would be some to whom He will declare on the Day of Judgement ‘*I never knew you; depart from me*” (Matt 7:23). Have I fooled myself all these years into thinking that I am a Christian, when perhaps I am not?

Theologically, these probing pastoral questions are all about **personal assurance of salvation**. Significantly this is the subject about which the Heidelberg Catechism begins, asking ‘*what is your only comfort in life and in death?*’. The response expresses a certainty of personal assurance of salvation “*that I am not my own but belong – body and soul, in life and in death – to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ*”.

At the time of the Protestant Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church vigorously fought against the teaching that personal assurance of salvation is possible, thinking that this would lead to people leading careless, lawless, godless lives and that they also wouldn’t have any interest in the church. One of the leading figures in the Counter-Reformation was Cardinal Robert Bellarmine. He famously said, “*The most heretical and dangerous thing about Protestantism is the doctrine of assurance*”. That an individual could read the Bible and trust in Jesus and have an infallible assurance of their salvation was an afront to everything the Roman Catholic Church stood for.

Writing in the early 17th century, the authors of the Westminster Confession of faith said that ‘*infallible assurance does not so belong to the essence of faith but that a true believer may wait long and contend with many difficulties before he partakes of* *it*’. (WCF18:3).

John Bunyan, the 17th century author of ‘The Pilgrims Progress’ wrestled with deep doubt about his own salvation and his experience is reflected in the captivity of the characters Christian and Hopeful. Their imprisonment in Doubting Castle symbolises a period of extreme spiritual distress for these two Pilgrims. They were locked up by their own fears and doubts. Do they truly have saving faith? Will they ever make it to the Celestial City? Are they among those elect predestined for salvation? Their cruel and oppressive captor, named ‘Giant Despair’ represents the crippling anguish and hopelessness in their own hearts.

Hebrews 6:4-6 reveals the reality that some who have been baptised (been ‘enlightened’), have participated in the Lord’s Supper (‘tasted the heavenly gift’), and have had some experience of spiritual gifts (‘shared in the Holy Spirit’) have then irreversibly ‘fallen away’. Some people appear to have saving faith, but later show that they were never truly saved (e.g. 1 John 2:19). It is therefore possible to have a false assurance of salvation.

Yet the Bible also reveals that ‘*full assurance of hope until the end*’ (Heb 6:11) is also possible. This assurance is not grounded on the strength of personal faith, nor on the quantity of quality of good works, nor on diligence in repentance and partaking of the sacraments, but solely on the promises of God. We’re going to begin by focusing, as our text in Hebrews 6:13-20 does, on the unfailing promises of God, then on the suffering that believers can experience when they doubt their own salvation, and finally on the liberty that assurance of salvation brings to the soul.

1. **God’s unfailing promises**

In this modern ‘information age’, we hear the word ‘disinformation’ frequently. We have so much access to news both home and abroad, but how can you tell whether or not it is true?

In a court of law, those called to the witness stand traditionally place a hand on a Bible and swear before God to tell the truth. In such an instance, the holiness, authority and power of God are called as a witness to the proceedings. In our text, the writer to the Hebrews explains that God guaranteed the truth of His own promises to Abraham with an oath (Heb 6:17). Why? “*so that 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*” (Heb 6:18). Those ‘two unchangeable things’ were:

* The confirming of God’s covenant with Abraham when the symbols of God’s presence – the smoking fire pot and a flaming torch - passed between the carcasses of the slain animals (Gen 15:17). By passing between the torn animals (signifying the punishment due those who break the covenant) God invoked an oath or curse upon Himself should He fail to keep His covenant. This was a graphic representation of God’s unfailing covenant promise.
* The verbal oath of God when He said to Abraham after this father’s faith in God’s promise of offspring was tested and proven by his willingness to sacrifice Isaac. “*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*” (Gen 2:16-17). This was a rock-solid proof of the certainty of God’s true promise because, as the writer to the Hebrews notes “*it is impossible for God to lie*” (Heb 6:18; also Num 23:19).

The covenant blessings of the Lord in providing comfort, security and peace for His people are often represented in Scripture by life-giving flowing water. For example, think about Psalm 23: “*He leads me beside still waters*” (v2). Or Psalm 65 that we sang earlier “*You visit the earth and water it; you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water*” (Ps 65:9). God reveals that in the New Heavens and New Earth there will be “*the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb*” (Rev 22:1 cf. Eze 47).

In The Pilgrims Progress, as Christian left the wicked town of Vanity Fair, where the pilgrim Faithful had been unjustly tried and killed, he met Hopeful, and they travelled on together. They passed a pillar of salt in the shape of a woman, upon which is written "*Remember Lot's wife*" (Luke 17:32). In Scripture, the wife of Abraham’s nephew Lot looked back (Gen 19:26) at Sodom and Gomorrah, ignoring the Lord’s warning (Gen 19:17) and became a pillar of salt. She was more attracted to these evil cities than to the promises of God.

Bunyan writes that Christian and Hopeful then came to a very pleasant river, “*which David the King called ‘the river of God’, but John called ‘the river of the water of life’*" (Ps. 65:9; Rev. 22, 1-3; Ezek. 47). It was lined with fruit trees and beautiful meadows bright with lilies and other flowers. Drinking the Water of Life, the weary Pilgrims were greatly refreshed and remained there for several days, picking fruit and sleeping in the meadows.

Moving on, they found that the Holy Way ran along the river bank for a time, but then it veered off onto rough ground which was very hard on their sore feet. They were "much discouraged" until they came to another place called By-path Meadow. Suggesting that the going might be easier in the meadow, Christian climbed over the stile (a step or steps that enable people to climb over a fence or wall) to have a look. Finding this path which seemed to go parallel to the Holy Way, he persuaded Hopeful that they should take it. In doing so, both pilgrims went astray and came into great danger, which brings us to our second point.

1. **The dungeon of despair**

As the Pilgrims progressed through ‘By-path meadow’ they saw a man called ‘Vain-confidence’. This man thought that he was heading for the Celestial City. However, he had a false assurance of his salvation. He thought that he was saved, but he fell into a deep pit and was ‘*dashed to pieces with his fall*’. Mr. Vain-confidence was like those the writer to the Hebrews describes as having ‘fallen away’. They stray from the narrow path that leads to live, never turning back in repentance. In the language of Heb 6:6 “*They are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt*”.

Then, in the Pilgrim’s Progress, the weather dramatically changed and it began to rain with thunder and lightning and the water rose all around them. Unlike Mr. Vain-confidence, Christian and Hopeful both realised that they had unwisely left the King’s Highway. Hopeful groaned within himself, saying ‘*Oh that I had kept on my way!*’. Christian said ‘*Who could have thought that this path should have led us out of the way?*’ saying to Hopeful “*I am sorry I have brought you out of the way and that I have put you in imminent danger. My brother, forgive me; I did not do it out of evil intent*”. Hopeful forgave the older man Christian saying that he believed that what had happened would be for their good, but it was Hopeful who led them on the way back.

Bunyan notes that “*I thought that it is easier going out of the way when we are in, than going in when we are out*”. Straying from the King’s Highway is easier than getting back on track again. Have you not found yourself that it is easier to fall into sin than it is to repent? Eventually Christian and Hopeful found a little shelter, and being weary, they fell asleep in the grounds owned by Giant Despair.

In the morning this giant accused them of trespassing on his land and forced them to go in front of him as he drove them and put them in his castle, in a ‘*very dark dungeon, nasty and stinking*’. There *‘they lay from Wednesday morning till Saturday night, without one bit of bread, or drop of drink, or light’*. Giant Despair’s wife said that her husband should ‘*beat them without mercy*’ – which he did. The next morning, again following his wife’s advice Bunyan writes ‘*he goes to them in a surly manner as before, and perceiving them to be very sore with the stripes that he had given them the day before, he told them, that since they were never like to come out of that place, their only way would be to make an end of themselves, either with knife, halter (a noose round their necks) or poison*’. Before he could attack them again, the giant mysteriously fell into one of his habitual fits and lost the use of his hands.

Christian and Hopeful seriously considered suicide, but then remembered the Lord’s commandment ‘*you shall not murder*’ (Ex 20:13). Hopeful said ‘*who knows but that God, who made the world, may cause that Giant Despair may die, or that, at some time or other, he may forget to lock us in; or that he may lose the use of his limbs*’. Bunyan writes *‘with these words Hopeful did moderate the mind of his brother so they continued together in the dark of that day, in their sad and doleful condition’*. Hopeful reminded Christian of how the Lord had previously enabled him to overcome Apollyon, to pass through the Valley of the Shadow of Death and to pass through Vanity Fair.

The next day the Giant took his prisoners to the castle-yard and showed them the bones and skulls of those pilgrims he had already torn to pieces. Doubting Castle represents the painful and sometimes prolonged imprisonment of the soul when doubts about one’s own salvation arise. The experience of John Bunyan himself, and of his fictional characters Christian and Hopeful mirrors the anguish I have observed in some brothers and sisters in Christ over the years; not only as they approach death, but at other times also.

Perhaps there is someone here today who is locked up in the dungeon of their own despair – lacking confidence that they truly belong to Christ? Be encouraged! - being in this sad state does not mean that you are unsaved. The Westminster confession (18:4) helpfully explains: “*True believers may have the assurance of their salvation shaken, diminished, or temporarily lost in various ways: as by negligence in preserving it, by falling into some special sin which wounds the conscience and grieves the Spirit, by some sudden or violent temptation, or by God’s withdrawing the light of his countenance and allowing even those who reverence him to walk in darkness and have no light*”.

You may have in the past, or maybe will in the future, find yourself held captive in ‘Doubting Castle’ - miserable in a dungeon of despair. A sudden sickness or significant loss might land you there as you ask yourself the question ‘*if the Lord really loves me, why did he allow this to happen to me?*’. The grief and self-doubt of watching your own children or grandchildren going astray may cause you to question whether you yourself are truly saved. The persuasive arguments of the unbelieving world may lead to you wondering whether or not you can fully trust God and His Word.

Some Christians never visit Doubting Castle and are never tormented by Giant Despair, but many go there for a time on their way to the Celestial City. The good news is that there is a way to escape and so to be free from being locked up by your own fears and doubts. Which brings us to our third point.

1. **The liberty of assurance**

On the Saturday night, about midnight, Christian and Hopeful, still held captive in Giant Despair’s dark dungeon, began to pray until almost break of day – just like Paul and Silas in the Philippian Jail (Acts 16:15). Very early on Sunday morning, Bunyan writes “*good Christian, as one half amazed broke out into a passionate speech: ‘what a fool I am, thus to lie in a stinking dungeon, when I may as well walk at liberty! I have a key in my bosom, called Promise, that will, I am persuaded open any lock in Doubting Castle’*”.

During all those miserable days of despair, Christian had with him the means of his escape – all he had to do was use the key that was already in his possession! That is what he did. The dungeon door opened with ease when the key was turned in the lock. The outer door that led to the castle-yard also opened with the key. The final gate, made of iron was not so easy ‘*the lock went desperately hard; yet the key did open it*’. So the pilgrims made their escape from Doubting Castle. Giant Despair was unable to stop them because, going into another one of his fits, his limbs failed him.

Christian and Hopeful came again to the King’s highway and were safe, being outside the Giant’s domain. They erected a pillar by the stile that led to By-path Meadow with the words inscribed ‘*This is the way to Doubting Castle, which is kept by Giant Despair, who despises the King of the Celestial Country, and seeks to destroy his holy pilgrims*’. Bunyan writes ‘*Many, therefore, that followed after, read what was written and escaped the danger*’.

I marvel at Bunyan’s way of describing the bleak experience of a lack of assurance of salvation and of the way back to liberty in Christ - which is taking hold of the promises of God. This mirrors the revelation of Scripture in Hebrews chapter 6 where the writer, having shown how absolutely reliable God’s covenant promise is, then applies this to living in Christ. He says “*we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us*” (v18). Those who had ‘fled for refuge’ are those who have believed in the promises of God, being the ultimate heirs of the covenant made with Abraham (Gal 3:26-29).

Brothers and sisters in our Lord, the sure promises of God give us strong encouragement to grasp and hold onto the hope we have in Christ. The writer to the Hebrews uses the maritime imagery of a ship’s anchor that is able to prevent a vessel being set adrift. Listen again to the assurance of God’s Word: “*We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain*” (Heb 6:19). The Scriptures are plain and clear: personal assurance of salvation is possible and that assurance is **not** grounded on any aspect of ourselves for example: the strength of our faith, the number of ‘good works’ we do, our diligence in the spiritual disciplines of prayer, Bible study, congregational worship, or giving.

You may gain greater assurance by living a godly life (2 Pet 1:10); You may find the ‘key called Promise’ more readily if you have stored God’s Word in our hearts (Ps 119:11); You may not stray very often or very far from the narrow path if you are careful to listen to the loving warnings of God and to strive for holiness (Heb 12:14). Yet, if you trust ultimately in yourself, your godly living, your knowledge of Scripture, or what you see as your own holiness then your anchor will not hold you fast because your hope is not in ‘*the inner place behind the curtain*’ – it is not in Christ. Mr. Vainglory was like that. He never made it to the Celestial City because he was on the wrong path. He perished on the way. Like Lot’s wife, he did not trust in the promises of God.

Christian and Hopeful also travelled By-path meadow for a while. What was the difference for them? They turned back to the Way when they realised their mistake. On the way back they became trapped in Doubting Castle and the way out was to remember and hold fast to the unfailing promises of God – then they were free!

I don’t know exactly where you are in your life’s journey today. Perhaps you are closely following the narrow hard way that leads to life (Matthew 7:14)? Be assured that whatever happens to you, if you continue to believe in the sure promise of God – that Jesus has secured your salvation entirely by His work on your behalf – then you are completely safe in Him. No one and nothing can snatch you out of His hand (John 10:28).

Perhaps you have strayed from the narrow hard way, thinking that you would take an easier route but perhaps you have then found that your assurance of salvation has been lost. The way back to the King’s highway is through repentance and returning to trusting fully in the promises of God. Remember that straying from the narrow path is easier than getting back on track again. Jesus said "*If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free*." (John 8:31-32).

Do you trust and believe that what God has said is true? That He never lies? Yes? Then you have the key called Promise in your possession. This is most certainly the key to set you free from doubt and despair. Sometimes the locks in ‘Doubting Castle’ open easily with the key called Promise, but sometimes they are ‘desperately hard’. However, always the key of God’s sure promises prevails so that all who trust on Christ alone will most certainly be saved. Therefore today, with believing hearts we, brothers and sisters, can say with confidence and assurance: *I am not my own but belong – body and soul, in life and in death – to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ*”.

AMEN.