

'Our Forerunner', Hebrews 6. 18-20. Bethesda Meditation. 27 January 2008.

Hymn :

*When darkness seems to hide His face,
I rest on His unchanging grace.
In every high and stormy gale,
My anchor holds within the veil.*

*On Christ the solid Rock I stand,
All other ground is sinking sand;
All other ground is sinking sand.*

*His oath, His covenant, His blood,
Support me in the whelming flood.
When all around my soul gives way,
He then is all my Hope and Stay.*

*On Christ the solid Rock I stand,
All other ground is sinking sand;
All other ground is sinking sand.¹*

My reading for this morning comes from the letter to the Hebrews – first, from the closing section of chapter 6, coming in at verse 18 : we 'have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us: which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters into that *within the veil; where the forerunner is for us entered*, Jesus' – and then from chapter 9 verse 12, 'Not with the blood of goats and calves, but *with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption for us*'.

On Friday, I had been thinking of a totally different meditation for this morning, but, in our quiet time that evening, Linda and I happened to read our Lord's comments about the work and ministry of John the Baptist. When praying over the passage, I used the word 'forerunner'. And, as I did so, my mind leapt to the first passage I have just read, and there and then I decided to change my subject, and to focus on this lesser-known description – not of John the Baptist – but of our Lord Jesus Himself.

In his letter, the writer to the Hebrews speaks of two things which are '*set before us*'. Immediately, there is, he says at the beginning of chapter 12, a '*race*' – 'since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses (the men and women of faith whose exploits are summarised in chapter 11), let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us', Heb. 12. 1. But beyond that race – however long or short it may be for us – there lies, the writer assures us, a '*hope*', Heb. 6. 18 – there lies that glorious destiny for which we now hope.²

And this 'hope', he says, acts as an anchor for our souls – it functions as a dependable 'anchor' – an anchor 'both sure and steadfast' – to keep our souls secure through all the trials and storms of life.

And the *original* readers of his letter were certainly no strangers to storms and trials. He bears them record in chapter 10 that they had earlier accepted – and accepted joyfully – the plundering of their possessions, Heb. 10. 34, and he reminds them in chapter 13 that they had 'not yet' resisted to the point of shedding their blood, Heb. 13. 4 – with the clear implication that, *in the future*, some at least would lose *their lives* just as, *in the past*, they had lost *their goods*. Small wonder therefore that some of them were now in danger of losing their spiritual moorings – of 'drifting away', as he expresses it at the beginning of chapter 2³, and of being 'swept away' as he expresses it in chapter 13.⁴

And yet the writer could assure them that their hope – the 'anchor' of their souls – lay in a region far beyond the reach and range of all their trials and losses – for, as he says, it 'enters into that within the veil' – enters, that is, into the heavenly 'Holy of Holies'⁵ – enters into the immediate presence of God Himself.

But, we may well ask, what guarantee and evidence do we have that we *shall* finally enter into God's immediate presence – with all its joys and blessedness? Ah, the writer says, 'our hope *enters* into that within the veil; where the forerunner is for us *entered*'.⁶ And our assurance that *we shall one day enter there* rests foursquare on the fact that *our Lord Jesus has already entered there* – and, what is more, that He has done so as our 'forerunner'.⁷

And the word which the writer uses of our Lord – 'forerunner' (paraphrased by the NIV as 'who went before us') – is a rather expressive word. For, although this particular word isn't used elsewhere in the Greek Bible to describe any other man of men⁸, its meaning and significance is well-known from many *non-biblical* writings.

Scholars tell us that it was largely a military word – often used to describe troops sent on in front of the main army to scout the territory ahead. This advance guard would make lightning attacks on enemy forces to establish their real strength.⁹ So, for example, Alexander the Great, one of the world's greatest military commanders, had a special

corps of cavalry who acted as mounted scouts. These were his *'forerunners'*, and their main function was to ensure the safety of the main army which followed behind.

The word was also used in naval contexts. For example, it described small, speedy craft sent before the main fleet to strike unexpected blows at enemy ships to make it relatively safe for their own larger vessels to follow. The word was also used to describe the pilot boat which led large ships safely along the channel into the harbour of Alexandria, a harbour which was notoriously difficult to navigate.

Now, I am not suggesting that the writer had *any* of these references in his mind. But one thing is certain. The word translated 'forerunner' indicated to both the writer and his readers *someone who went on in front to make it safe for others to follow*.¹⁰ And it may well be that, for this very reason, the Holy Spirit never uses the word to describe the role and work of John the Baptist. But He does use it – here – to describe our Lord Jesus.

For He, our Lord Jesus, has entered heaven itself *in such a way* as to make it safe for us one day to follow Him there.¹¹ As we read from chapter 9, 'Not with the blood of goats and calves, but *with His own blood* He *entered* the Most Holy Place once for all, *having obtained eternal redemption for us*'.¹² And the One who has entered 'within the veil' *for us* as our Forerunner first obtained eternal redemption *for us* by the shedding of His own blood. Put at its simplest, eternal safety for us meant untold suffering for Him.

There, and there only, lies our assurance – our guarantee – that, where *He is now*, we shall be *one day*.¹³ And *that* is our hope – that is our 'anchor' – and that is why we were able to sing with confidence at the outset, 'In every high and stormy gale, my anchor *holds* within the veil'.¹⁴

What amazing love – that the Son of God would rather *come down to earth* and *die for us* than *remain in heaven* and *live without us*. What amazing love – that He cared less for Himself and His heavenly splendour than He did for you and me!

And so, as we meet to take the bread and cup this morning, we remember that, *as our sacrifice*, our Lord Jesus once obtained eternal redemption *for us* that, *as our Forerunner*, He might enter heaven *for us*.

Endnotes

¹ 'My hope is built', Edward Mote, circa. 1834.

² As indicated by the expression 'set before us', the writer does not use the word 'hope' of a feeling or emotion. He points to the future and uses it to describe the object of our expectation, that which is hoped for. Compare Titus 2. 13, and see the article 'Hope' in W. E. Vine's *Expository Dictionary* and the foot of page 369 of *Treasury of Bible Doctrine*.

³ 'It behoves us to give more abundant attention to the things which we have heard, lest we *drift away*', Heb. 2. 1 lit.

⁴ 'There was a danger lest the Hebrews should be carried ... away from the straight course of the Christian life ... Wetstein gives examples of the word being used of objects swept out of their right course by the violence of the current', B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, on Heb. 13. 9. Translate 'be carried along'.

⁵ Heb. 9. 3; compare Lev. 16. 2.

⁶ 'The human name ('Jesus') of the Lord, placed emphatically at the end of the sentence', B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, on Heb. 6. 20.

⁷ That is, *our hope* enters there, verse 19, because *our Saviour* has, verse 20.

⁸ In the Greek Old Testament, it occurs only in Num. 13. 20 ('the days of spring, the forerunners of the grapes') and Isa. 28. 4 (be as the 'early' fig). The Apocrypha also uses the word only once – of wasps, 'Nevertheless even those you spared as men, and sent wasps, forerunners of your host, to destroy them by little and little', Wisdom of Solomon 12. 8.

⁹ Such as the Scythian cavalry and the Spartan advance guard. See William Barclay, *Jesus as They Saw Him*, article 'Forerunner'.

¹⁰ 'The whole essence of the word *prodromos* (forerunner) is that it describes someone whose function is to go first in order to make it safe for others to follow', *ibid.* page 327.

¹¹ In the immediate context, the writer mentions our Lord's office of high priest; '... within the veil; where the forerunner is for us entered, Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek', Heb. 6. 20. But, taken by itself, the office of High Priest failed to convey all that was in the writer's mind. As our High Priest, the Lord Jesus could offer the sacrifice of Himself 'to make propitiation for the sins of the people', Heb. 2. 17 *lit.* As our High Priest, the Lord Jesus could intercede with God for us, Heb. 7. 25. As our High Priest, the Lord Jesus could represent us before God, Heb. 9. 24. But it was not the role of the High Priest of the Old Testament to lead others into God's presence! As the people's representative, he entered once a year into a place into which nobody might follow him.¹¹ It was unthinkable that Aaron should have entered the Holiest on the Day of Atonement at the head of a file of men! The writer therefore supplements the office of 'High Priest' with the description 'Forerunner'.

¹² The writer uses the verb 'to enter' many (17) times, but only three times of the Lord Jesus – and each time of His 'entering' heaven. Chapter 9. 12 looks *backward* and tells us something about the *past*; He entered 'having obtained eternal redemption'. Chapter 9. 24 looks *upward* and tells us something about the *present*; for, having entered, He appears 'now' in God's presence. And chapter 6. 18-20 looks *forward* and tells us something about the *future*.

¹³ The apostle Paul spoke of our Lord Jesus, risen from the dead, as the 'first fruits', 1 Cor. 15. 20, 23. As such, He is the guarantee that, if we die, we too shall rise to victory. But the writer to the Hebrews speaks of the One who has entered heaven as the '*forerunner*'. As such, He is the guarantee that we also shall enter the place where He has gone.

¹⁴ That which is our 'anchor' does not lie unseen in the deepest sea, but unseen in the highest heaven!