

## Title: “Mr. Cliff Hanger”

Chris Ryan

Ephesians 1:3-14

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**Service Readings:** Amos 7:7-15; Eph 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29

**Lesson:** *God knew that not only would we find it be impossible to acquire salvation on our own, he knew that we'd find it impossible to hang onto it once Jesus secured it on our behalf. He knew that for us to live eternally with him, he would not only have to do the work but would have to sustain it. And so, he made a promise with us, a covenant that guaranteed our salvation completely and with full certainty. We have no cliffhanger because we know the end of the story - it has already played out on our behalf, and we have the promise from God that we'll celebrate this end after Jesus returns*

### Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

There is a children's television show called “Between the Lions” and in each episode they show a cartoon that stars a man named Cliff Hanger. The opening scene is always the same - we see him in need of rescue, holding on to a branch that juts out from a cliff. He pulls a book from his backpack, reads a lesson of some sort, and then the cartoon ends with him being flung or flown or bounced towards safety. He never quite makes it because for one reason or another he misses the ledge above or bounces from a net below and ends up exactly where he started - hanging from the branch on a cliff and, once again, in need of rescue. Will he ever experience freedom? Will he ever be saved? That question is answered in the very last episode, number 40, when he spots a whale in the distance, but I would like to set Cliff aside for just a moment. We'll come back to him, but keep him in your mind as I read the first couple of verses of our Epistle passage:

<sup>3</sup>Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, <sup>4</sup>even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love <sup>5</sup>he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will,

In many ways these verses can serve as our own lesson from our own book, the Bible, that we pull from our own backpack when it seems like we are clinging to our faith with everything we've got. When we find ourselves somehow hanging from the branch of faith, wondering if it is strong enough to support us or if it will break away and cause us to fall. And we know that deep down, even if we do let go or even if it does break away, that by the grace of God we'll find ourselves back on solid ground. And so, the struggle is never a struggle of permanence - it is never about losing our faith forever. It's about not letting it slip through our grasp while we live through that moment.

And so, it might be tempting to find comfort in the ebb and flow of Cliff's adventures - knowing that at times you'll find yourself hanging from a cliff but know that you'll always be saved. And it might be peaceful to know that no matter how many episodes you live through you'll one day find yourself in the presence of God. But the few verses that I read actually proclaim a different truth. And although this truth may be difficult to believe, doing so will bring even greater comfort than what you alone can provide. Those two verses I read turn the entire message on its head. For they show that it is not us who clings to faith, *but it is God who clings to us through Jesus.*

You see, God knew that not only would we find it impossible to acquire salvation on our own, he knew that we'd find it impossible to hang onto it once Jesus secured it on our behalf. He knew that for us to live eternally with him, he would not only have to do the work but would have to sustain it. And so, he made a promise with us, a covenant that guaranteed our salvation completely and with full certainty. He did it because he knew that, left to us, we'd let it slip through our fingers because of the weakness of our flesh. He knew that we'd either let go because of the power of Satan or we'd let go because of the power of the world - but either way, he knew that we'd let go.

And so, God gives us his assurance, one that only he can offer. He tells us that even before the foundation of the world, even before he created a single thing, he placed our salvation in the hands of Jesus for safekeeping. Paul goes on to explain how this happens, continuing in verse 7:

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace,<sup>8</sup> which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight<sup>9</sup> making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ<sup>10</sup> as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

The plan that he has for you is a plan that he created and committed to before time began. It is a plan that starts in the garden with the first sin and continues to the cross where Jesus offered himself as the payment for our sin. And the plan continues to this day in your life and in mine and will continue until it finds its completion when Jesus returns.

Now, I told you that this would be difficult to believe. All too often we see ourselves as Cliff - the one in charge of our own life, the one responsible for our own eternal health. We find comfort in thinking that it is by our own power and strength that we cling to God. We *want* it to be in our grasp because we can control it, then. We can decide if we are saved or if we will perish. We *need* it to be in our hands because the alternative makes no sense. The alternative is to let go and trust that God keeps his promises, and more specifically that he keeps his promises *to us*. The alternative is to admit that our eternal salvation is too important to leave to anyone but God.

Now, whenever the topic of predestination comes up, there are always questions about who God elects and who he does not, and so I want to spend just a few seconds on this. In our own human weakness we tend to view the topic of predestination as a binary choice: God either chooses us to be saved or he chooses us to be condemned. That is simply not true. Jesus died for everyone, not just God's chosen. He did so because God wants *all* to be saved and so he commands us to preach the Gospel to everyone because this is how we receive his call. We know that even though he desires all to be saved, he knows that human beings can resist, and some do resist this call of the

gospel. But this is a choice that they make and the damnation that they experience is because of their choice, not because of any choice or decision by God. To any further understanding about God's election is not for us to understand, for he has not revealed it to us. We are to trust his word that he wills salvation for all and to follow his command to preach the Gospel to the world so that all may be saved.

With that out of the way, we can come back to our reluctance of letting go and trusting in God's promise. How strong *is* it, really? God's promise. And how can we be sure that we are included in it? Well, Paul once again answers that in this morning's passage. Starting in verse 13:

<sup>13</sup>In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, <sup>14</sup>who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

In our Baptism we heard the Word and received the Holy Spirit. We were sealed with the promise, guaranteed and even protected by God himself. There is, therefore, nothing to fear - we can let go because we are confident in our salvation. But, again, God knows that this knowledge won't satisfy us for very long and that we'll search for a branch to grab onto sooner than later, and so he offers to us the body and blood of Jesus, himself as a reminder of promise that he offers and protects for us. Each time we heed his invitation to his table, each time we participate in the meal, we receive a renewal of his promise.

Unlike Cliff at the end of every episode, wondering how he will get down from that cliff, we have no cliffhanger because we know the end of the story - it has already played out on our behalf, and we have the promise from God that we'll celebrate this end after Jesus returns.

Oh, and about Cliff and how the last episode ends? Well, that will have to wait for a future sermon.

Let us pray

Lord God,

Now I know that the LORD saves his anointed;

he will answer him from his holy heaven

with the saving might of his right hand.

<sup>7</sup>Some trust in chariots and some in horses,

but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.

<sup>8</sup>They collapse and fall,

but we rise and stand upright.

<sup>9</sup>O LORD, save the king!

May he answer us when we call.

Amen

(psalm 20:6-9)