



LIVING WITH HOPE

SERIES: 1 PETER: LIVING FAITHFULLY WHILE SUFFERING

1 Peter 1:3–5

2nd Message

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The song that James and team sang for our offertory is entitled “I Will Be Blessed,” written by an English songwriter, Ben Howard. I heard the song for the first time in November. My wife and I had the privilege of being involved in Dylan Harrison’s wedding, the son of our former Jr. High pastor, Pat Harrison. As many of you know Dylan’s mother, Anne, died when he was nine years old. Liz and I loved Anne Harrison, as many of you did. In fact, Liz has a mystical connection with Anne and she was very present to Liz during the wedding weekend. Dylan asked Liz to be his stand-in mom for the mother/son dance at the reception, a very special gift and honor, and he chose this song. The words connected us to Anne and gave us comfort and assurance in Anne’s physical absence. The words are not all “Christian” but these words stand out:

Heaven is the place we know
 Heaven is the arms that hold us
 Long before we go

Heaven may not be some place up there, but it is real according to the Scriptures. The idea that something is waiting in the future is what allows us to live with hope and confidence in the present. How much does eternity shape the way you live now?

A big thanks to Ryan for his relief effort last week that helped get us started in Peter’s first epistle. As we continue this morning I would like to say a bit more about the readers of this letter. We know that Peter is writing to believers in Asia Minor, modern day Turkey. Peter mentions five different areas: Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. These were Roman provinces, although Pontus and Bithynia was actually one province by this time. This was a large area, about four-fifths the size of California, 350 miles by 100 miles. The area was also incredibly diverse—different languages and religions, culturally separated. Some areas were more developed like Asia in the west but some were sparsely populated. But this was the cradle of Christianity.

As Ryan talked about last week, these believers had two identities. In relationship to the world they were foreigners, aliens. On the other hand in relationship to God they were his chosen people. But who these people were is unclear.

Many scholars think that Peter is writing to natives of Asia Minor, indigenous people who had been converted by evangelists. However, it is hard to imagine that the more remote locations in Asia Minor were evangelized only thirty years after Pentecost.

There are also some who believe Peter is writing to Jews associated with the Diaspora. There were a large number of Jews living in Asia Minor at this time. The word Diaspora in the first verse refers to Jews that had been scattered since the time of exile in Babylon. The use of the word Babylon at the end of the letter

seems to reinforce this same idea. If this were the case Peter may not have had any association with his readers.

There is also the possibility that Peter is writing to Jews who had been expelled from Rome for making disturbances in the name of Chrestus. Acts 18 tells us that Claudius expelled all the Jews from Rome including Aquila, a native of Pontus. The Romans practiced colonization to provide military presence, foster commerce, and Romanize different areas in the empire. In particular the emperor Claudius established colonies in all five regions.

Perhaps these expelled Jews had been associated with Peter in Rome. According to Acts 12, Peter left Jerusalem and went to another place. Although there is no historical evidence, maybe Peter went to Rome to continue as the apostle to the Jews and he is writing this epistle to those who had come to Christ in Rome, but who were now living in Asia Minor. These Jews would have been foreigners who were neither citizens of Rome nor of the place they were living. If this were the case it would explain the many references to the Old Testament in the letter, how the gospel came to Asia Minor more rapidly, and why there is no mention of the Jew/Gentile issue. Whether these people are Jew, Gentile, or mix is unclear.

What is clear is that these people were beginning to face opposition from the pagan society for their faith in Jesus. This persecution was at a lower level than the state persecution of Nero, Domitian, and Trajan. According to this letter they are facing verbal slander, malicious talk, and false accusations, i.e. unorganized ostracism of varying intensity. Whenever Christians live boldly in society they can expect opposition and hostility.

Peter’s readers are suffering unjustly and so he writes a letter to encourage them in the midst of their discomfort and alienation. “How should they live in such a place? How should they treat each other? How will their faith survive?”¹ We might ask ourselves the same questions. We might not be literal foreigners but we are foreigners metaphorically. This is why Peter’s words can be so relevant to us today. Peter will really challenge us as to how we are living in our society as God’s people.

However, Peter does not begin with exhortations on how to live in the face of suffering. Rather he wants to give his readers an assurance of their identity as God’s chosen people and why they can live with hope and confidence. Here is our text:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by

God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Pet 1:3-5 ESV)

Blessing to God and Father

Peter begins with doxology or praise. The form of this praise is a standard Hebrew pattern. Every Jewish thanksgiving begins with the words "Blessed be God." In fact verses 3-12 are one sentence that falls under the idea of "Blessed be God," a phrase that occurs several times in the Old Testament. But Peter adds, "Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul does the same things in Ephesians and 2 Corinthians:

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. (Eph 1:3)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort. (2 Cor 1:3)

The addition of "Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" is new. "Jesus Christ" is mentioned four times in the first three verses. The God of the old covenant is the God of the new covenant. The God who entered into covenant and cleansed his people through the blood of animals in the old has sprinkled us with the blood of Christ in the new.

Blessings for a Living Hope

Peter immediately details the reason we can bless God and this reason is the source of Christian hope. These three verses are packed with truth and so in order to unpack their meaning I want to mention four ideas that are interconnected.

God has caused us to be born again

The idea is that believers are born again into a completely new existence. We are born in flesh but are reborn in Spirit. In Christ the Father of Jesus is our Father. We belong to a new family. This idea echoes what Jesus told Nicodemus in John 3:3 "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

We have no power to rebirth ourselves, to re-form ourselves. God has chosen us according to his foreknowledge and gives us new birth. Two things make rebirth possible — God's mercy and Christ's resurrection.

The LXX, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, translates the word "mercy" for the Hebrew word "hesed" in Ex. 20:6 and Deut. 5:10. God promises hesed or steadfast love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments. Hesed is a covenant word that defines God's character and conveys God's commitment to his people. When God reveals his glory to Moses he says: "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love (hesed) and faithfulness." (Ex 34:6)

Second rebirth is possible only through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The cross and resurrection defeated the powers of slavery and death. Peter will say in a few verses: "You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God." (1 Pet 1:23)

For Peter's readers this would have been a great encouragement. One can imagine what it might have felt like to live as a foreigner in a strange place, among strange people, being ostracized because of faith in Christ. One could easily be overwhelmed with a sense of not belonging, of not being at home. Peter wants to remind his readers that it is okay not to belong in society since they have been given a new birth and now belong to God, a God who is a caring Father.

We may not be persecuted like Peter's audience but we too may lack a sense of belonging. Have any of you struggled with this, for example in your family or in the place you work? Maybe some of you have moved here from a foreign country and you find the U.S. rather strange. Maybe you are not an engineer but an artist and don't feel like you fit in Silicon Valley. And so you need to be reminded that you belong to God and you can live with this confidence even though this earth will never seem like home. You may not feel reborn but you can take encouragement in the fact that you are a new creation in Christ.

We are born again into a living hope

The second idea here is that we are specifically born again into a living hope. "Into a living hope" modifies born again. As I said the four ideas I am mentioning are intertwined. Resurrection gives birth to hope. We have a hope that is living rather than dead or empty. Christ has been raised from the dead and because he is alive we can live with a vibrant hope.

This too would be a great comfort to Peter's readers. They have been forced to live in a place not of their choosing or liking. They are suffering unjustly for their faith. One can imagine the sense of despair and hopelessness they might have experienced as foreigners.

Webster's dictionary defines hope as "the feeling of wanting something to happen and thinking that it could happen; a feeling that something good will happen or be true."²

We all need hope. Most of us know the feelings of hopelessness or despair when we have been suffering for a long period of time or even when things just are not going our way while they seem to be going great for those around us. There are times when we sink into darkness as a result of dreams and longings that have not materialized. Have you ever spoken out to God: "I just need something good to happen?" We all have a longing to believe that the future will bode well.

As you sit here this morning, think about what your hopes might be. Maybe your hope is to get married or that your marriage will turn around. Maybe you are hoping for the new job or the new promotion. Maybe you are hoping that your children will succeed or start walking with the Lord. All of these might be fine hopes, but they also might set us up for despair if they do not come true.

Christian hope is different from optimism. Optimism is a natural virtue and a wonderful gift of temperament when things are going well, when you think tomorrow is going to be better than today. Christian hope has nothing to do with the belief that tomorrow is necessarily going to be better than today³

And so we need a hope in something that is guaranteed, which brings us to our third idea.

We are born again into an inheritance.

“Inheritance” also modifies born again and is governed by the same preposition as “living hope.” We are born again into a living hope and into an inheritance. The object of our hope is this inheritance. In the Old Testament, inheritance for God’s people was the Promised Land. When Israel came out of Egypt God promised his people a land flowing with milk and honey. For Peter’s readers land and property might have also been of primary importance. If these foreigners have been displaced from their homes then it is likely they have lost their property and thus their inheritance that would be passed down through generations. They have lost family rights and social standing. This loss could easily contribute to feelings of hopelessness. But they no longer have to put their hope in the things of earth because God has given them a new inheritance through rebirth.

Four things describe the inheritance we have as a result of being born again. First, it is imperishable, not subject to decay. In recent years I have seen that my body is falling apart, it is perishable. My house requires constant upkeep because it is perishable.

Second this inheritance is undefiled, meaning unspoiled and unstained by sin. Third, the inheritance is unfading. It “will never wither, grow dim, or lose its beauty or glory.”⁴ Peter writes towards the end of the letter: “And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.” (1 Pet 5:4) This crown of glory will never lose its luster.

Karen Jobs summarizes these three adjectives so well when she says that this inheritance “is untouched by death, unstained by evil, unimpaired by time; it is compounded of immortality, purity, and beauty.”⁵

And fourthly, this inheritance is being kept by God in heaven. Our inheritance is totally secure and guaranteed. No stock market crash can touch it. No change in foreign policy can alter it. No illness can threaten it.

When we are born again in Christ our inheritance is our portion in the kingdom of God, even though in the short term we live as foreigners and pilgrims on the earth. We have been raised with Christ; our life is hidden with Christ in God (Col 3). Christ is now the hope of glory. We have a living hope based on this future glory.

But here we can have a great potential problem and serious challenge. Often times we want earth as well as heaven. In other words we are trying to make the earth our home and we place our hopes and expend our efforts too much on things that are temporal and passing away. We seek to acquire and possess to relieve our anxiety, alienation, and despair rather than being content to live simply and place our hope in our future inheritance.

Peter is trying to remind his readers that even though they suffer hostility and lack a sense of belonging they can live with confidence and hope. And we can as well. Our life is not a series of hopes realized and lost. Our life is a pilgrim life based on the future. And our sense of hope will be proportional to the object of our hope. If we lose the whole world and yet gain our future

inheritance we will have it all. And this is what gives us freedom and purpose today. Perhaps Peter was thinking of Jesus’ words:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matt 6:19–21)

Living with this tension is not easy by any means. It is so much easier to put our hopes on things we can see. But as we learn to place our hope in God we can pray with St. Teresa of Avila:

Let nothing disturb you
Let nothing frighten you.
Those who cling to God
will lack nothing
Let nothing disturb you
Let nothing frighten you
God alone is enough⁶

God is guarding us until the future becomes reality

In Peter’s run on doxology the subject changes from God to you – you are “being guarded.” This word means to be kept safe or carefully watched. God himself is watching and protecting us until the end, until the new heavens and earth arrive, until Christ comes again. We might imagine that there is someone hovering just overhead watching with great interest our every movement, not in judgment but in love.

This watching involves two things—God’s power and our faith. Power and faith work together. Our faith does not necessarily initiate God’s power nor does God’s power produce our faith. We are dependent on God’s power working in us and bringing to completion what he has started. But our faith in God is imperative as well. Trust in God allows us to live in a world that has different values and practices, a place where we are not at home. Believers are not to renounce their faith, but to stand firm in an alien society by faith in God and what he has accomplished through Christ.

Peter writes that we are being guarded for a future salvation that is ready now, but will be revealed in the last days. Salvation in Peter does not refer just to being saved as a once and for all moment in time but rather to the overall outcome of believing in Jesus. Salvation is the ultimate deliverance that is the goal of redemption, a deliverance from this world that is hostile to God. We are born again into a living hope and into a living inheritance. We are being guarded into salvation. Salvation in all its glory is our inheritance and what gives us hope.

So how do we live as we await our final salvation and inheritance? This is what Peter’s letter is all about. The exhortation at the end of the letter is to stand firm in the true grace of God. The life of the future will not be fully realized until the end and yet we live in the present with hope and faith based on this future.

Peter will encourage us to neither compromise and assimilate to the world nor to isolate and detach from the world. We are to live in our society to make a difference. Even though we live as foreigners and even though we may suffer for our faith we

are to be a positive influence in society. For Peter the message of the gospel is of ultimate importance and we live in ways that attract rather than undermine its message. Basically the message of 1 Peter is this: fear God, do good no matter what happens, and suffer after the pattern of Jesus. And we can give ourselves to these things with hope and confidence because:

Heaven is the place we know
 Heaven is the arms that hold us
 Long before we go

“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.”
 (Rom 15:13)

1. Karen Jobes, *1 Peter*, (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2005), 41
2. “hope”.merriam-webster.com cited January, 2016. online: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hope>
3. Richard Rohr, *Hope Against Darkness*, (Franciscan Media, Cincinnati, 2001), 96
4. Wayne Grudem, *1 Peter*, (IVP Academic, Downers Grove, 1988), 62.
5. Jobes, *1 Peter*, 86.
6. Henri Nouwen, *Discernment*, (HarperOne, New York, 2013), 27

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