

A Living Hope

Our New Testament reading is 1 Peter 1:3-9. The First Letter of Peter was written by the apostle who used the nickname Jesus gave him, “petros,” meaning “rock” (Jn. 1:42; Matt. 16:18). Simon Peter wrote perhaps from Rome in the early to mid sixties to believers who had been scattered throughout Asia Minor by Caesar’s edict. As the “apostle of hope” encourages followers of Jesus to stand firm in the face of opposition and persecution, he reminds us even here and now, to be people with a living hope. I’ll read our text:

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, ⁷ so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸ Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, ⁹ for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

The word “hope” has a different meaning in the Scriptures than for the unbelieving world. Outside of biblical faith, hope is a concept that means little more than wishful thinking. We believers also use the word “hope” when we wish for a good turn of events. We hope the sunny, unseasonably warm weather will continue throughout the winter months, which is wishful thinking, and our favorite team makes the playoffs or that we have a white Christmas. We may also hope for more important things, like nicer neighbors or a better job, but this “hope” also may be mere wishful thinking.

Biblical hope is much more than optimism and wishful thinking. It’s a conviction that God’s promises will be fulfilled. It’s faith in the future as well as the present, and involves trust in God and his word to us. Often biblical hope is even against all appearances to the contrary. “Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed,” writes the apostle Paul (Rom. 4:18), when facing the humanly impossible odds against the fulfillment of God’s promise of a son through Sarah.

The “apostle of hope” Simon Peter writes to disciples scattered throughout Asia Minor, facing difficult circumstances and in need of the hope that only their faith in Jesus could give them. The message is vital to our age, which is greatly in need of hope. Jean-Paul Sartre expressed the hopelessness of existentialist philosophy in the mid 20th Century in his play *No Exit*. Sartre pictured hell as people confined eternally to a room, where they had to face one another, with nothing to see or share except their mutually sordid lives. A memorable line in the play was “Hell is other people,” and the implication was “Hell begins when

hope ends.” Sartre understated the reality of hell, but did remind us “how desperately we need hope” (43f).

Peter praises the Triune God for our new birth, which began our new life in the kingdom, introducing us to our living hope, which is the heart of this passage. Bible scholar William Barclay says that there are few passages in the New Testament where more of the great fundamental Christian ideas come together than in verses 3-5. Because of our new birth, which came about by the grace of God, working in us from the moment we first believed, repented of sin and began to follow Jesus, we are daily becoming new creations (2 Cor. 5:17).

Because we are in Christ, we have access to every spiritual blessing in kingdom living (Eph. 1:3). Through the new birth we have become people of faith and also of a living hope that God will fulfill every purpose for our lives, both now and for eternity. Although we live in this present fallen world of the old kingdom, we belong to the new kingdom and have begun already to live in the reality and by the power of the new age of the everlasting kingdom. Unlike the world’s hope of wishful thinking, our hope in Christ and in the reality of the eternal kingdom grows stronger day by day. As people of a living hope and eternal perspective we also live by faith under fire.

Peter writes to followers of Jesus who are experiencing a “normal Christian life,” which is not what we in the US have come to think is normal. Many of us were evangelized through a persuasive sales technique that promised that “God loves us and has a wonderful plan for our life.” Indeed, God does love us, but his plan includes placing our faith under fire in order to prove its veracity and quality, whether or not it’s fitting us for eternal glory and is of use for God’s kingdom. In this same letter, Peter says we’re not to be surprised at the “fiery ordeal” that takes place among us. It’s quite normal, and has the goal of testing our faith and strengthening our hope (4:12).

Peter alludes to bad things happening to God’s people, things that bring grief, that try our faith to prove its value, just as gold is refined in fire, which burns out the dross (6f). Peter reminds us that we are shielded by God’s power during times of difficulty, trials and the testing of our faith (5).

We speak of someone who’s never experienced difficulty as having lived a sheltered life. Indeed, God doesn’t allow his followers to live a sheltered life, but he shields our faith from harm. This is how I understand the Psalms that speak of God’s promise of protection for his people from all harm, danger and death. Of course we know that God’s people often experience even physical harm and violent death, and sometimes because of their faith and faithfulness to God. I believe the promise is true because God protects the faith of his people and our eternal life and destiny are secure and his purpose for our lives is fulfilled for his glory and honor. We’re not sheltered, but we are shielded.

This message about faith under fire from the “apostle of hope” is treasured by those who are suffering for their faith and are experiencing God’s sustaining grace. This is the reason that 1 Peter is said to have been the most popular book in the 90’s in the former Yugoslavia and in Muslim Indonesia (McKnight).

I have a notion that 1 Peter is a popular book to the believers who today are suffering for their faith in many other parts of the world.

We are sustained and encouraged when our faith is under fire because we realize we're following in the steps of our Savior, Jesus, who calls us to follow him in a cruciform, i.e. cross-patterned life (Lk.9:23ff;14:25ff) and that our identity as his followers is a guarantee of our difficulty and suffering (Jn. 15:18-16:4). As NT Wright says, following Jesus is costly: "You don't get to share God's life and escape without wounds."

But Malcolm Muggeridge shares from his life experience that the elimination of affliction from our lives would not only be unhelpful, but would be spiritually disastrous:

"Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my seventy-five years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence, has been through affliction and not through happiness, whether pursued or attained. In other words, if it ever were to be possible to eliminate affliction from our earthly existence by means of some drug or other medical mumbo jumbo...the result would not be to make life delectable, but to make it too banal and trivial to be endurable. This, of course, is what the Cross signifies. And it is the Cross, more than anything else, that has called me inexorably to Christ" (72).

But just as Jesus' suffering and death on the cross was followed by his resurrection and glorification, so we live in the hope of our resurrection and our sharing in his glory. Even as he faced the cross, Jesus knew the "joy set before him" (Heb. 12:2). And we too can keep focused on our future joy (8).

Like those in Peter's readership, we have the blessing of a living faith that allows us to love Jesus and be filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy even though we have not seen Jesus with our physical eyes (8). We have the blessing of a real faith that doesn't depend on physical sight, which Jesus told Thomas was to be a greater blessing than to have immediate, physical sight of the risen Jesus (Jn. 20:29). Our faith and our hope grow stronger as we live in trust and obedience to and growing love for the unseen but present Christ.

Our living hope is for a future inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade and that is being kept in heaven for us (4). This was an important and encouraging word to these believers scattered throughout Asia Minor. Many of them had in all likelihood been uprooted from their homeland, having to leave behind their property and, in leaving behind their homes, they also lost their family inheritance. But their true, lasting and invaluable inheritance was safely being kept for them in heaven.

We can sympathize with the hopelessness of many who in the most recent economic crisis lost all of their life's savings. For many of these people, their material savings represented all of their hopes and dreams for the future. Peter

tells the faithful followers of Jesus that their really important inheritance is safe and secure and even amassing in significance, unlike the investments many of us have made in New York's Wall Street and other uncertain investments.

Likely many of these hearing Peter's letter read in the churches were followers of Jesus who had been disowned by their families upon their conversion to Christ, just as many today are being disowned by their parents and siblings in various world religions and cults. These believers found new family in the churches, and Peter assured them of their inheritance in Christ Jesus that would make any worldly wealth pale into insignificance.

Peter writes that we are to rejoice in our living hope which will end in our final salvation. We're now people who live by faith and who have a living hope, but some day we will see Christ face to face and will receive our final and full salvation (1 Jn. 3:2). No longer will we live by faith, but we'll see Jesus face to face (1 Cor. 13:12) and will live by sight, with complete spiritual insight and understanding. All that we hope for now will then become our full possession. What we now have is a foretaste and a guarantee, but then we'll receive all that's been promised (2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Eph. 1:14).

The atheistic philosopher Sartre reasoned that hell begins when hope ends. But we say that heaven begins when hope ends, that is when hope is fulfilled and becomes sight. Hope ends not as disappointment but as glorious fulfillment. Life without hope in our final salvation is life that's without direction, purpose and lasting significance.

Our hope ends at its promised culmination—in the complete fulfillment of all that God has promised us. Peter says that this is the outcome of our faith, the salvation of our souls (9). Our use of the word "salvation" is often a reference to an initial conversion experience, and we speak of salvation almost as a past experience that guarantees our future, regardless of the quality of our faith or our spiritual walk or moral conduct. Once we "get saved" it's as though all our troubles are over and there's no need for growth or effort on our part. Such "salvation faith" is mere presumption.

We've been saved, but are also God's being saved people of faith, whose life of obedience and trust proves the verity of faith (Jas. 2:14ff; Matt. 7:15-23). And we'll finally be saved when we enter the glorious presence of the Lord, and our faith and hope become sight. The salvation of the soul (9) means the salvation of the entire person, body and spirit, the complete person and the person made absolutely complete in Christ, and not the salvation of just a "spiritual being." As NT Wright says, "We are saved not as souls but as wholes." What God is doing now in our progressive salvation will be completed on the day of Christ Jesus (Phil. 1:6).

What a precious gift is our hope in Jesus Christ, a living hope that encourages, sustains and comforts us through all life's circumstances! His hope gives us an eternal perspective on this life and its momentary trials and present suffering (Rom. 8:18; 2 Cor. 4:17).

Our hope isn't wishful thinking, or the efforts we make to be positive thinkers against the reality of life. Our hope is, in the words of the writer of Hebrews, "an anchor for the soul, firm and secure" (6:19). This living hope that Jesus gives never disappoints, even though it carries us, not on a bed of roses, but through some heavy trials and a life of sharing in the sufferings of Jesus. But the living hope assures us that after the life of bearing a cross with Jesus we will be raised and glorified with him.

Some of you here today are desperately hoping for reconciliation with a family member, better health or for some stability in your life. If you trust Jesus Christ you will be born anew and can grow as a person with a solid hope. You can know with absolute assurance that your life, your marriage, your health, and even your departed loved ones, are all in the hands of the Lord Jesus. You'll have the peace and assurance that nothing in your life, even the worst part of it, will be wasted on you, but will add to your growth in godliness as your preparation for your certain eternal home. And as people of hope we can and must strive toward justice and peace in this present world, which in God's time will become his perfect, everlasting kingdom. This is *not* wishful thinking. It's God's promise.