

Living Hope in Suffering Times

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Date: 16 January 2022

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[0 : 0 0] Amen. It's hard, isn't it, to imagine a world in which things cannot be stolen. Some of our best loved films and books begin, don't they, with the idea that even precious jewels and vast sums of money can be stolen from the world's safest places, from our best loved detective novels to the most ridiculous heist thrillers. Secrets can be stolen too. I found out this week, actually at the start of 2020, the UK cyber security sector was worth roughly 8.3 billion pounds.

That's what was spent to stop valuable secrets, digital information being stolen. Perhaps one of the most painful things that any of us can go through is things being stolen from our houses.

I know two people, he had their houses burgled, both lost things that were irreplaceable. A gold necklace handed down from a grandmother, an engagement ring, things precious to these families now gone forever. But in this opening passage in 1 Peter, Peter lets us in on a secret.

There is something that cannot be stolen, he says. I wonder if you saw that as we read there in verse 4. He speaks about an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade. It is being kept in heaven for ye.

It is not of this world, he says. So nothing in this world can touch it. And what a wonderful thought that would be for the Christians living in these different regions.

[2 : 0 0] I have a map that can come up on the screen, just showing us where those regions are. Some of those places might be familiar. You can see Ephesus, for example, we read about elsewhere in the Bible.

But those different regions, we've got the Galatia in the middle, Bithynia, Pontus, right up at the top, Asia, kind of across to the left. That's the kind of area that Peter's writing to, where these churches are. And today that is all Turkey. And as for Christians today living in Turkey, being a Christian in those places then, was hard. Our old church partnered with a church in Turkey, Antalya Protestant Church, in a country of 80 million people. It's reckoned there are about 120,000 Christians.

It's less than a quarter of a percent, a tiny minority. And the pastor of that church, Kerem, would regularly get death threats, not from the state, but from people in his community, neighbors of his. At one time, the police came to their church services, not to shut them down, but to protect them from people in the community. But for all they've lost for Christ, their safety, their reputation, their name, their homes in some cases. Well, Peter says whatever those brothers and sisters might lose for Christ here and now, God is keeping an inheritance for them that they cannot lose, that cannot be taken from them. And that's true for every believer today, for us, ourselves, if our faith is in Christ.

And we saw last week, didn't we, that Peter wrote this letter to Christians suffering in the day-to-day as Christ's followers, as they followed Christ in a world that doesn't love him? And so, to keep us going, following Christ, Peter begins his letter with an eternal and lasting hope. He sets before us the great gain that we have in Christ, even as we go through difficult times for him here and now.

Well, to pick up the language that we used last week, he sets the crown in our eyeline to help us to bear up the weight of the cross. How can we lose for Christ now and still gain for having Christ in the end? Well, firstly, says Peter, because God has given us a hope that can't be touched, a hope that can't be touched. Verse three and four, a great way to begin the week, aren't they?

[4 : 52] They're often used as a call to worship in our services, and that's because they excite us for the hope that God has given us. Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In his great mercy, he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. A living hope. Now, looking at our world, hope maybe isn't a word that comes to mind.

We don't live in a particularly optimistic time in our world, do we? And so you'd think maybe shifting your identity from the center to the sidelines of society, well, whatever hope we might have had has been completely lost. You know, people in general can't hope for much, well, what do we as Christians have to hope for? Well, says Peter, we have more to hope for than anyone because God has given us a living hope, and it's a living hope because it comes from a living Lord. Do you see that in verse four?

He's given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Hope lives because Christ lives again, says Peter.

Remember, if you know the story of the disciples who walked the road to Emmaus, their disappointment and dejection. They only knew Jesus had died, condemned and crucified. They hadn't heard yet that he had been raised. And they say, we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. We had hoped, past tense.

[6 : 41] But for them, that hope has died because Christ the Redeemer is dead. But then their eyes were opened, and they recognized you they were talking to Christ himself back from the dead. And their hope blazes to life again. Did our hearts not burn within us as he spoke to us on the road, they say. We have a hope that lives because we have a Lord who lives.

We can tell Peter. Peter was a preacher. Verse three is really punchy in Greek. It's kind of lost in translation. But we could say, we have been born again to a hope that lives through the rising again of Christ from death. You can imagine Peter saying that and someone in a church in Cappadocia or Bithynia saying, Amen. Last week, we dwelt a lot, didn't we, on Christ's suffering and death. Peter does that, too, in his letter.

But here he reminds us that if Christ had stayed dead, well, we as Christians, of all people in the world, would be most to be pitied. Because our hope in this life hangs on the fact that Jesus, who died, rose again from the dead, rose again from the dead, and now lives. And so, if you're here this morning wondering, perhaps, what Christianity might have to offer you, wondering if there's any truth in it at all, well, let me suggest that you start by looking at the evidence for Jesus' resurrection. I'd love to spend time doing that with you. It maybe sounds like a strange place to start at the end, but it's the best place to start. Because if Jesus did not walk out of the tomb and leave it empty, then heaven is empty. If Jesus is dead, our hope is dead. But if he is risen, if he was raised from the dead, then our hope lives, and heaven is open and full of those who put their hope in him.

And we are reminded this morning that, praise God, he is indeed risen. And so, we have a hope that lasts through suffering. We have a hope that lives even when the threat of death hangs over us.

And so, how do you and I get hold of this hope this morning? Well, says Peter, we get this hope from God. It's a living hope that we cannot lose because of the one who gives it to us. See that in verse 3?

[9 : 27] In his great mercy, he has given us new birth into a living hope. This hope is a gift from God through a new birth. You must be born again, says Jesus. And so, says Peter, Christians, God has birthed you again.

It's such an intense and personal and powerful image, isn't it? There could hardly be a greater gift than being born. And that's where it all begins. And it begins as a gift. Because being born isn't something you do, is it? It's something that's done to you. I can testify to that. I'm sure many of you can. The midwives in the labor ward don't say push to the baby. They say push to mum. Nobody says today to the baby, work and wriggle and push harder. The baby is helplessly born. And then, strongly, powerfully held and loved and guarded in the hands of the one who has given them birth.

That is what God does for us, says Peter, again, on the inside, our hearts, spiritually in Jesus Christ, new birth. And his point is, we don't get hope in Jesus by hoping hard enough. Peter's not saying, hope it until you have it. He's saying, God gave you a new hope through giving you new life, through a new birth, so that you could hope in a newly resurrected Jesus. Hope is his great gift to us.

And if we didn't have to earn it, well, how can we lose it? Our hope is sure because of the one who gives it to us. Friends, there's so much security for us in knowing that we follow Christ and hope in him because of God's gift. Remember how Peter addresses these Christians, verse 1, dear God's elect, you've been chosen, verse 2, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father. When did God know that he would give you new birth? Before the foundation of the world, before the beginning of time, says Peter, he knew beforehand. Not in the sense that he received information about what we would decide, but in the sense that he knew then and decided what he would do. And so if your hope is in Jesus, says Peter, you are chosen by God. And what he began, he sees through all the way to the end, if you glance down at verse 5. Who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. From the beginning of time, before the beginning of time, through time and to the end of time, we are held in God's almighty hands. He's the one who sees us through even the worst that today holds for us and that tomorrow might hold or the day after that because hope is his gift. Not our feeling that comes and goes, not our resolve through gritted teeth that we will make it. And what God has given us, we cannot lose. You are born again, writes Peter, verse 4, into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you. We cannot lose it. That is how secure our hope is in Jesus. As one writer puts it, this inheritance is untouched by death, unstained by evil, unimpaired by time.

Because our hope, our inheritance is nothing less than Jesus himself. Who is it who has been raised from the dead, verse 3, is kept in heaven, verse 4, and who will be revealed in the last time, verse 5, who is this great living conqueror of sin and suffering and death? It is Christ himself, isn't it? Consider his value, says Peter. Later in this chapter, it was not with perishable things like silver or gold that you were redeemed, but with the precious blood of Christ.

[14 : 06] There's not one thing that we inherit from God, brothers and sisters, that is not wrapped up in Jesus Christ. Whatever gain we have from God is in him. There's nothing more precious than him to us. Silver decays, says Peter, even gold perishes, but Jesus Christ in his infinite goodness and glory is the same yesterday, today and forever. And so we have this secure and living hope in Christ, the sure and steadfast anchor for our souls given to us by God himself. We have a hope that cannot be touched. And that's a security that we desperately need to know about and hold on to, because secondly, we have a faith that can be proved. Faith that can be proved. Have a look down with me at verse 6.

Why do we need a hope that can't be touched? Well, in all this, says Peter, you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

We need hope now because we face hard things now. We suffer grief in all kinds of trials. And what Peter says to us in verse 6 helps us in all our suffering.

Christians are not immune from suffering, are we? His faithful readers suffered all the kinds of suffering there are to face in this life as we do. But holding on to our hope in Christ when we go through painful times of loss or illness or grief does give us strength to praise God even though we suffer. And now Peter isn't saying that the suffering isn't real or that it shouldn't bother us. No, he says it grieves us. And some of you know that really personally right now. But Peter would remind us this morning there is something even more real than our pain. Often when our pain feels close, Christ feels far away. But soon Peter will encourage these Christians, these suffering saints in verse 8, though you have not seen him, you love him. Our world tells us that seeing is believing.

Well, we did see Christ in his death and his resurrection. We will see Christ, says Peter, when he returns in his glory. But right now, Christ is hidden out of sight.

[16 : 50] For a brief window of time, we cannot see him. But that doesn't mean he is any less real or present or weighty than our lives here and now. He has life as we have never known it. And so we love him and believe in him. And for the hope that he gives us in our suffering, we love him and praise him and delight in him. But we have to be careful about what Peter says next. And to do that, we need to keep the context fresh. We saw last week Peter wrote to these people because they were suffering particularly for their faith in Christ. So the sorts of trials particularly he has in mind here are the sorts of things like being left out of business deals because they were not cut through enough to throw their colleagues under the bus, not joining in the crass humor and so becoming the butt of the joke, perhaps facing tension at home because of their faith in Christ. Their suffering is a direct result of their Christian faith. Now this kills dead in the water, doesn't it? The idea that if we had enough faith, we wouldn't suffer. Because if Peter's readers didn't have faith, they wouldn't be suffering in those ways. If they denied Christ, the suffering would stop, wouldn't it? And not all suffering is like that. General suffering happens to us all, faith or no faith. But we also suffer for our faith.

And that is why Peter says in those times, verse 7, these trials have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith of greater worth than gold which perishes though refined by fire may result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. That's why he can say this is why you are suffering in the way that you are suffering. In general, let me say this, we shouldn't presume to tell people why they're suffering. The biggest reason is because we don't know. That's what God taught Job, isn't it? God was angry with Job's friends because he said, you have not spoken of me what is right. They come to Job and say, well, God is doing this or that thing in your life.

Well, who can guess what God is thinking? We can't guess what he's thinking. It can be so unhelpful to people and angers God when we presume and pretend that we do know what he is thinking.

So let's be careful with this. But Peter can say these trials in particular have come to prove and purify your faith. And he can say that because their suffering is a direct result of their faith.

This suffering proves your faith, he's saying, because if your faith wasn't firmly rooted in Christ, well, you would stop suffering. You would give in. You'd be like the seed in Jesus' parable that fell on the rocky ground. They had no roots, so believed for a while, but in a time of testing fell away. But where our roots, where our faith is firmly rooted in Christ, well, the test only proves the genuineness of that faith. This is one reason why the church is so alive in places where Christians are persecuted, because every day is a test of faith for them. Every day their lives prove that Jesus lives and their faith isn't in vain and their hope won't put them to shame.

[20 : 39] And for us, when we do come up against situations in which we have to choose between sin on the one hand or suffering on the other, as we will, brothers and sisters, well, Peter is saying, let your suffering be a proof to you that your faith is real and genuine. As you keep going with Jesus through your suffering, let it give you assurance that you are growing not on the rocky soil, but in the good soil, perhaps you are in a tough corner right now, or perhaps have been, and you're tempted to be done with it, to throw in the towel. Is this faith worth suffering for? Well, look how Peter describes your faith in Christ. Verse 7, of greater worth than gold, greater worth than gold, which perishes though refined by fire. What would you give not to suffer anymore? You can give gold, says Peter, you can give your valuables, you can give money, but don't give up your faith. It is more precious than any earthly possession. It is worth suffering for. And it only grows in value as you suffer, because our faith isn't only proved by suffering, but purified by suffering. Like gold, he says, that's purified in the fire, and those trace elements of other metals are burned away. So, our faith is purified in the fire of suffering, as our sin and misplaced trust and false hopes are burned away, and leave in us only praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. And so, for the joy is set before us when he comes, even through our suffering now, we can rejoice, says Peter, because it proves our faith.

We heard as our call to worship Romans chapter 5, the first two verses, but here's verse 3, we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance character, and character hope.

Here is suffering worth rejoicing in, because we have a faith that can be proved through it. And finally, something for us to take heart in. God has given us in Christ a glory that cannot be dimmed, a glory that cannot be dimmed. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.

Or as another translation, the English Standard Version puts it, we rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory. Last week, we saw the golden thread that runs through this letter is suffering now, glory then. But we get a taste of that glory to come, says Peter, as we gaze at the glorious Savior who is coming. Peter's writing remembered to people who had never seen Jesus alive on earth. They lived in other countries, other places, and they don't see him now, of course, because he's died, been raised, and is in heaven, seated over all things. Yet, says Peter, what a glorious thing it is that though you do not see him, yet you love him. Though you have never seen him, yet you believe in him, yet you believe in him. Because his glory cannot be dimmed by the shadows of this world. What you're suffering, it cannot touch your hope in him, because it can't overshadow his life and glory. And because you love him and believe in him, says Peter, verse 9, you're receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls. Brothers and sisters, what gives us joy like nothing else? Well, surely it is being saved. You, I don't know about ye. I certainly don't rejoice in my salvation nearly enough. Thank God for rescuing me from my sin. I praise Jesus for his blood poured out for my forgiveness. But do I rejoice in the fact that God, the creator and the sustainer of everyone and everything, has rescued me? I am, I'm sure I'm not the only one. And perhaps we together as a church need to pray with David, give me back the joy of my salvation. Give me back the joy of my salvation.

Because our faith in Christ results in us being saved. That's the simple good news of the Bible. But what a difference it makes to our lives to know that, to have come to love and believe in the one who does that for us. Perhaps you've not yet believed in him. Perhaps you do not love him today.

[25 : 57] We'll be under no illusion. To do so will mean suffering. But to do so will mean salvation. I and any other Christian here today could tell you, along with Peter, that what you gain for trusting Christ is far, far greater than anything you could possibly lose for doing so.

He gives us hope that can't be touched by our suffering. Faith that stands through testing. Joy beyond words. Rescue from sin, death, and darkness. Because his glory cannot be dimmed by this world. And one day soon his glory will be seen as never before.

You don't see him now, says Peter, but, verse 7, there's a day coming when Jesus Christ will be revealed. You'll see him. When? Well, notice Peter says our hope is kept in heaven, but heaven isn't where we'll see it. We'll see Christ when he is revealed, when he comes back.

Yes, Christ is in heaven, and those who have trusted in him are there with him. But we and they still have something better to hope for. What is better than heaven? Well, heaven on earth.

That's the Bible's promise to us that we, who believe, will join him in a new world. Yes, we will go up to heaven with him when we die. But at the end of time, heaven will come down to earth when he comes again. Let's put it this way. Salvation isn't God airlifting us out of a sticky situation or smuggling us secretly across the border to safety. No, salvation will be the show-stopping arrival of Jesus in glory with his angels to make all things new, to put the world right in perfect righteousness. God doesn't press the panic button and rush in and save us and leave the world burning.

[28 : 12] No, he has a glorious plan. From our point of view, he's playing the long game, although, of course, long and short means nothing to God, because he plans to send Jesus a second time, to save those who trust him, to bring us into a glorious new world, to judge those who have stood against him. And no matter what happens between now and then in his plan, that glorious inheritance of a new world, free from sin and suffering and death, can never perish, spoil or fade.

Brothers and sisters, that hope is going nowhere. And so while Peter says you are being saved, he can say with even more joy, salvation is coming, because Jesus is coming again. On that day, writes John in Revelation, he will wipe away every tear from our eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. For now he is hidden out of sight. But brothers and sisters, his glory is as yet undiminished. And if we love him and believe in him, well, we will see him soon.

Let that thought fill you with glorious joy, even in our suffering, that he will wipe away every tear from our eyes. And death will be no more, for he will have made all things new. A hope that can't be touched.

A faith that can be proved. A glory that can't be dimmed. Oh, church of Christ, let us rejoice. Let's pray together.

God, our Father, we praise you and thank you as the author of life, the giver of every perfect gift, for this gift of what you have given us in Jesus.

[30 : 21] New birth, new life, living hope, a glorious inheritance that we cannot lose. Father, we thank you because we live in a world that knows no hope.

Lord, its faith is so fragile in the future. But we have a glorious future in Christ. And so we pray, our Father, that even today, whatever it holds for us, whether it be suffering, pain, loss, grief, or terrible sadness, yet we pray, Lord, that you would help us to hold on to that hope, not with gritted teeth, but, Lord, be held by it in the hands of Christ.

Lord, we pray for those who as yet don't know that hope. Lord, we pray that you would grant it to them in the Lord Jesus, that they would see him, his glory, his love, his wonder, and be drawn to him.

Lord, we praise you that he is coming soon. And we pray, Lord, with your church through the ages, come, Lord Jesus, and make all things new.

For in you we hope, in Jesus' name. Amen.