

A Living Hope

1 Peter 1:1-12

Key Verse: 1:3

“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....”

On this first Sunday of 2009 we are beginning the study of 1 Peter. This new year brings a season of change to our nation. We will have a new president and we can expect many things to change politically and socially. We are also in an economic crisis unlike any since the Great Depression. In addition, our nation's role in the world seems to be changing from the superpower to one of the powers in a global society. In the midst of a changing environment, should we change? It may be okay to change our hairstyle or music preference. However there are some things that we should not change. We must not go astray from the truth of God. We need an anchor for our souls that can keep us grounded in God's truth. We can find our anchor in this letter. This letter was written by Apostle Peter to early Christians scattered by persecution. Peter teaches them the living hope that we have in Jesus Christ. This hope is sure and unchanging. This hope enables us to live as a royal priesthood and a holy nation no matter what the world is like. In verses 1-2, we can learn about Peter and the early Christians. In verses 3-4, we discover the living hope in the kingdom of God. In verses 5-12, we learn that the living hope gives us security, great joy, and genuine love. Let's accept the living hope of the kingdom of God in our hearts today.

I. Peter greets the early Christians (1-2)

This part teaches us about the author, Peter, and the people he was writing to, the scattered early Christians. Peter introduces himself in verse 1a saying, "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ...." Peter was well known to the early Christians and, through the gospel stories, he is well known to believers down through the generations. He was the top disciple of Jesus. Originally, his name had been Simon, common for young men of the time, like David or John might be to Americans. But Jesus changed his name to Peter, which means "rock." Jesus had a vision to raise him from an ordinary man, subject to selfishness and fear, into a courageous and loving leader for the early church. Peter liked Jesus' hope for him and began to follow Jesus as his disciple. Peter saw in Jesus the love of God and the holiness of God. Peter saw many great miracles that Jesus did. Peter finally confessed to Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16). Peter's confession was a recognition of God in Jesus and also a vow of loyalty.

A Living Hope

And in one corner of his heart, he dreamed of sitting at Jesus' right hand in earthly messianic glory.

Then Jesus foretold that as the Messiah, he must suffer, die and rise again. It was time for Peter to adjust his idea based on the truth of Jesus' words. However, Peter did not. Peter wanted to enjoy success and glory with Jesus without suffering or death. When Peter insisted on holding his own idea, he could not accept Jesus' promise that he would rise again (Mk 14:28). Peter's idea that conceived his own dream was not based on Jesus' truth. When Peter confronted the moment of Jesus' arrest and trial, he denied Jesus three times and revealed himself to be a selfish coward. Peter's pride was broken and he wept bitterly from his soul; self-confidence drained out of him like sand through an hour glass. To Peter it seemed the end of discipleship as a tragic failure. But to the Risen Christ, it was the time to help Peter. The Risen Christ visited him several times, finally at the seashore of Galilee. This time Peter deeply realized that Christ had risen. He could overcome fear and selfishness. Jesus restored his love relationship with Peter and commissioned him to feed Jesus' sheep. This same Peter, after receiving the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, proclaimed the gospel of Jesus to the very men who had crucified him. In one day, three thousand repented and the early church was born. Peter served and defended the early church at the risk of his life and with all his heart and soul. In the grace of Jesus' forgiveness and restoration, Peter was raised as an apostle of Jesus Christ. Now Peter is clear that in the grace of Jesus Christ he is an apostle. He is writing to the early Christians as Jesus' representative, and his words carried the divine authority of the Lord himself.

Look at verse 1b. "To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia...." Here Peter addresses the recipients of his letter. First, he calls them "God's elect." This means that they were chosen by God. What a precious privilege it is to be chosen by God. Recently, we concluded a presidential election year in the United States. After many debates and primaries and an intense election, Barack Obama was chosen to be the next president of the United States. Of course, he was chosen by the people of the United States. However, since God is the sovereign ruler of all creation, it was God who chose Barack Obama according to his own will and purpose. Among the millions of people in the United States, Mr. Obama was chosen to fill the office of the most powerful man in the world. It is a great privilege and a heavy responsibility. However, his term is limited to four years, eight at most. Then he will resume life as an ordinary citizen again, like former President Carter. In comparison, God's elect are chosen by God for eternal life as royal citizens in his heavenly kingdom. As royal children they are superior to elected officials.

A Living Hope

Everlasting heaven is superior to temporal earth. Therefore, it is a greater privilege to be God's elect than America's president. God's elect are really somebodies.

Although being God's elect is a great privilege, there is a side effect. It is to become a stranger in the world. Those who are touched by God's eternal power and love lose their interest in the petty and evil things of the world and they begin to crave holy and eternal things. To worldly people, they look strange. There was a girl who went to parties and enjoyed many boyfriends. Her parents said nothing about it. Then, through Bible study with a Christian friend, she met Jesus personally. Gradually, she lost interest in worldly fun. She began to spend time in Bible study and even became a Bible teacher. Then her parents began to persecute her, calling her strange. As we live holy lives in and for Christ, we will be strangers in the world, as he was.

The people Peter was writing to had been scattered by the winds of persecution to Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia (cf. Ac 8:1,4; 11:19-21). All of these places are within modern day Turkey. At one time, many of these believers had been happy in a fellowship in Jerusalem, where there was the word of God, and God's power and love were manifest. It was a beautiful love community where each person was ready to sacrifice everything for his fellow believers. However, in his wisdom, God allowed a fierce persecution to spread them all over Asia Minor. In this way, they carried the gospel message to those who had not heard. This persecution had been hard to bear. Some had lost their lifelong trades or occupations. Some had suffered family divisions. They had fled to places that were unfamiliar to them and had cultural and language problems. In some cases, their situation was not better than illegal immigrants in the United States. Yet, wherever they went they preached the gospel and the Holy Spirit worked mightily and new churches had been born. To these people, who had many real difficulties and practical challenges, what could Peter say?

Look at verse 2. "...who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance." Peter assured them that there was nothing random or accidental about their scattering. The Father God, who knew them even before they were born, had chosen them and was using them according to his own salvation plan. When God chose them, he gave them his Spirit, who worked in their hearts to purify their desires and to give them a new capacity to enjoy the holiness of God. God chose them to obey Jesus Christ by growing in his image and spreading his gospel to the world. In order to accomplish this, God shed the blood of his Son for our sins, to cleanse us and to

A Living Hope

empower us to live holy lives of mission without fear. God loved them and us so much that he gave his precious Son Jesus for us. Since the Triune God was with them, they could have overflowing grace and peace, and so can we. We don't have to be stressed out by circumstances or political situations. We can have real confidence and peace in our hearts.

II. A living hope in the kingdom of God (3-4)

After his greeting, what was the first thing Peter did? It was to praise God (3a). Peter praised the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his heart and soul. Peter did not share words of pity or sorrow, but praises to God. Why? Look at verse 3b. "In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...." God has done something for us that is so great that we should praise and thank him forever. God has given us new birth. This is what we needed most. Ephesians 2:4 says that we were dead in transgressions and sins. We were not just wounded or sickly, we were dead in sin. Though our bodies were alive we were cut off from God. We were destined to live in the deadness of sin on earth and then face eternal condemnation in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. Dead people cannot be revived with medicine; they need life. Dead people can do nothing for themselves. But God, in his mercy, infused his Spirit into us and gave birth to a new life in us. God gives this new birth through his word when we believe it from our hearts (1:23). There was a thief on the cross next to Jesus who was being condemned justly for his sins. But he heard Jesus' words, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34a). He accepted this word into his heart and began to believe it, even though he was a terrible sinner. By faith he asked Jesus to remember him and Jesus promised, "Today you will be with me in paradise." This man received a new life while dying on a cross for his sins. I was dead in my sins of lust and pride and selfishness. Though I looked okay outwardly, I was as miserable as a demon possessed man inwardly. My deadness, like gangrene, spread deadness to others as well. As the consequence of my sin, I deserved eternal punishment. By God's grace, I studied the gospel with Dr. Samuel Lee and wrote down the gospel key verses repeatedly. Romans 6:23 came into my heart. It says, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Through this word the Spirit of God came into my heart and gave me new life. I became a new creation in Christ. It was God's gift of grace. God, in his great mercy, will give new birth to those who accept his word in their hearts.

Among the many things that could be said about the new birth, Peter emphasizes the impact that it has on one's hope. New birth gives us a living hope in the

A Living Hope

kingdom of God. Hope is important to any human being. Dr. Billy Graham has said that man can live without sex, but man cannot live without hope. Dr. Victor Frankel specialized in treating suicide candidates in Austria. A Jew, he was imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II. He began to help other prisoners to attain mental well-being even in the prison camp. He found that those who had hope, any kind of hope, were more likely to survive. But those who had no hope would soon perish. Many survived the terrible conditions by holding on to hope of seeing loved ones again. Frankel's 1946 book, "Man's Search for Meaning" explains this. Man must have hope. However, the object of our hope is very important. Simply speaking there are two kinds of hopes: dead hope and living hope. Dead hope has as its object something that perishes, spoils or fades away. This hope can give a person inspiration and motivation for a while, but sooner or later, it will lead to disappointment and even fatal despair. To those who attain the hope, meaninglessness follows. Alexander the Great conquered what seemed to be the whole world. Afterward, he did not celebrate. Instead he sat down and began to weep, saying, "There are no more worlds to conquer." He died soon afterward at a young age. On the other hand, for the vast majority of people, the problem is that they lose hope because it seems to be unattainable. From time to time, we hear of students at prestigious universities--who seem to have everything going for them--suddenly take their own lives. Sometimes it seems to follow times when they lose hope of meeting the expectations of their families or loved ones. In pride, they may not be able to admit their real problem to others. But when they lose hope, they can no longer live in this world.

We need a living hope. What can be our living hope? Look at verse 4. "...and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade, kept in heaven for you...." Our living hope is an inheritance that never perishes, spoils or fades. The kingdom of God is our living hope. Jesus promised his disciples in John 14:2, "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you." The King James version translates "rooms" as "mansions." Jesus our good Shepherd, who knows each of us intimately, is preparing a custom mansion for each of us. It will be beautiful beyond imagination and nothing ever breaks. Also, there will be no mortgage payment. In addition, Jesus promises to give each of his children a new spiritual body in his kingdom. Our present bodies are weak and subject to back pain, allergies, heart attack, and so on. Ultimately they wear out and we die, even if we go to the YMCA every day to exercise. But the new bodies that Jesus gives are imperishable, glorious, powerful and spiritual. Women will all be beautiful beyond imagination and all men will be strong and handsome forever. The kingdom of God is so beautiful and wonderful. It is where we live forever with our loving heavenly Father and his dear children,

A Living Hope

including our own loved ones. Revelation 21:4 tells us that "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." This is our living hope and it is our true and everlasting hope. We have this hope on the basis of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Jesus' resurrection is an incontrovertible fact of history. It shows us God's final victory over sin and death. It is a prelude to the resurrection of all people when Jesus comes again in great power and glory. Then death will be swallowed up in victory. We who have received new birth in Christ will all experience this, either when Jesus comes again or when we go to him. Let's read verses 3-4 together. "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, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade--kept in heaven for you...."

This live hope has a tremendous impact on our lives in this world. 1 John 3:3 says, "Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure." The living hope purifies all of our other hopes and desires. Instead of hoping to marry an attractive worldly person, we can hope to marry a holy man or woman of God. Instead of hoping to get a Ph.D. for our own honor and glory we can hope to get a Ph.D. for the glory of God. Instead of hoping to make a great achievement for our own selfish ambition, we can hope to be used greatly in the work of God to feed his sheep and to raise disciples. Those who have living hope in the kingdom of God can have great hope for themselves, their families, their friends and neighbors, their community and even for their nation.

III. Security, joy and love (5-12)

Some of the rich benefits of new birth into the living hope in the kingdom of God are spelled out by Peter in the remaining verses in this passage. Among them, let's consider three.

First, security (5). Jesus did not give us a living hope in our hearts while leaving us to fend for our lives in this world like soldiers trapped behind enemy lines. Jesus gives us true security while we live in this world. Look at verse 5. "...who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time." When we have faith in God he protects us with a mighty shield of his divine power. Nothing can touch his dear children without his permission until we arrive safely before him in his heavenly kingdom.

A Living Hope

Second, great joy (6-9). The assurance that God is saving us through the gospel gives us great joy. Of course, as we live in the world, we still face trials of many kinds. We still suffer from grief in these trials. But we have a great comfort and assurance that God uses these trials to improve the quality of our faith. As gold is purified by fire until it is 24 karat pure gold, so our faith is purified by trials until it is proved genuine and worthy of praise. When we see how God uses everything to help us be ready to receive his reward and blessing in his kingdom, our hearts are filled with inexpressible joy.

Third, genuine love (8). There is a mystery at work here. Even though we do not see Jesus in the flesh as Peter and the other disciples did, we experience the love of Jesus in our souls. This gives birth to love for Jesus in our own hearts. We begin to love Jesus passionately whom we cannot see. This love for Jesus grows and matures in our hearts and enables us to love others with depth and passion. Husbands who have Christ can love their wives with the love of God and vice-versa. As love grows we can embrace many different kinds of people with the love of God.

Those who have the living hope in the kingdom of God are the envy of the universe (10-12). The prophets grasped something of the wonder of the gospel of Christ, but they could not fully understand it. God told them that they were not serving themselves but the future generations, including us. The great prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah were given a mission by God to serve us, right here in Chicago UBF in 2009, so that through prophecies that they did not fully understand, we could receive the gospel and have life. Not only is this so, but angels also envy us. We are the envy of the universe.

In this passage we have thought mostly about the living hope of the kingdom of God. This is a hope that will never disappoint us. Rather it will give us strength and joy and love in our souls until Jesus comes again or we enter the heavenly kingdom, whichever comes first. Let's pray to live with this hope in our hearts in the new year 2009.