

Living Hope

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This is now the sixth Sunday in which we have had to “meet” in this way to share the Word of God together. I am grateful that God our Father is holding you all in the palm of His hands. I was blessed this week to see many of you (from a six foot distance) and hear that you are well despite the ongoing challenges of isolation required to keep us safe from COVID-19. Praise be to God for His protection and care! I still have a few more packages to deliver, so if you haven’t seen me yet, be prepared for a visit this coming week.

Today we move from our series on the life of the Apostle Peter to a look at the two letters he wrote to the church: 1 Peter and 2 Peter. I encourage you to read these letters through, in one sitting, over this next week. Today, we will focus our thoughts on the first 12 verses of 1 Peter, so please take a few moments now to read those verses prayerfully.

We know the author well as we have journeyed together with him from the point of his calling by the Sea of Galilee to his first imprisonment (resulting from his faithful proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ) and his miraculous release! We observed together how his brash, brusque nature was transformed by the Spirit, making him a bold witness of God’s goodness and faithfulness in

bringing salvation through His Son, Jesus Christ. We reflected on his many mistakes, along with his many triumphs of faith. In him, we have seen ourselves, again and again – sinners saved by grace; sinners transformed by the Spirit of God to do good works and bring many into a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. As we journey with Peter through these two letters, we will now see the loving, gentle pastor he became, by God’s grace, as he planted many churches throughout Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey); a pastor whose greatest longing, as he nears the end of his earthly life, is to encourage and inspire deep hope and faith in all those who are called Christians.

You will hopefully recall that while the Church had experienced a period of peace upon the conversion of Saul (later known as Paul), a period of persecution had returned under Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12). Despite these persecutions, the Church continued to grow and flourish. Though the Book of Acts is silent on Peter’s missionary journeys, these two letters affirm that he was active in proclaiming the Good News across northern Asia Minor. Churches popped up all across the Roman Empire because of the faithful witness of the Apostles! And the majority of the believers stayed true to their faith, in the midst of persecution.

In its earliest days, Rome viewed this new faith as a sect of Judaism and as such, Christianity was sanctioned by the state and protected from legal

persecution. Herod, however, quickly recognized a strong animosity between the Jewish leaders and the leaders of this new sect, and found that persecuting its leaders brought him much favour with the Jews (Acts 12:1-3). When believers were first given the name Christian in Antioch (Acts 11:26) the separate identity of this new religion became clear to Rome, and the legal protections available to those practicing Judaism no longer applied. Being a Christian actually became illegal across the Roman Empire. Arrests weren't common, but if disputes arose between Christians and other Roman citizens, the simplest thing for the adversary to do was to report the Christian's newfound "faith" to the authorities who would then take care of the problem!

The persecutions of Christians ramped up extensively under Emperor Nero. In 64AD he had Rome leveled by fire. The citizenry believed him responsible, as he was known to flatten cities so that he could rebuild them for his glory. In an effort to sway the people's beliefs, he sought a 'scapegoat' and found it in the Christian Church. He had all kinds of slanderous lies levelled at the Christians in Rome, the primary one being that they were responsible for the great fire. As a result, Christians throughout the Empire experienced all kinds of persecutions from their neighbours and from the authorities. Nero himself would have Christians in Rome captured and set on fire to light the night skies in the city!

It was just prior to the Great Fire in Rome that Peter is believed to have written 1 Peter. This letter reflected the persecutions that were being experienced at the time, while also preparing the believers for even greater persecutions which were to come. Only the Holy Spirit of God could have inspired him to write such a letter at such a time. 2 Peter is believed to have been written just after the Great Fire when that ramped-up persecution was in full effect. The primary message of both 1 and 2 Peter is to stand firm and hold on to hope. Chuck Swindoll captures it with these words,

“Don’t peter out!”

We have not experienced the kind of suffering and persecution that Christian believers faced in those days, but the messages shared with them are still relevant to us today. The need to stand firm and hold on to hope applies even when the sufferings and trials we face are not extreme. They can take their toll. Faith can diminish. Hope can fade. But holding tight to Jesus and leaning on the Spirit’s power can keep us from “petering out”!

Well, that was a lengthy introduction to these letters (epistles) and the circumstances of the Church at the time they were written. Sorry! Let’s take a look now at the first 12 verses of 1 Peter. As was customary at that time, the

sender of the letter is identified right at the beginning: Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ (verse 1). The receivers are identified as: (a) God's elect – meaning, chosen! (b) Strangers (foreigners) in this world – their true home was heaven! (c) Scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia – all Roman provinces in northern Asia Minor – evidence of how wide-spread the Church was at that time.

Peter goes on to affirm the work of the Triune God in the lives of these believers.

The early-day believers were: (a) Chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father – before time began God had planned to save and establish His people, the Church, His chosen people! (b) Sanctified – meaning cleansed, purified, and set apart for Kingdom service -- through the work of the Holy Spirit. (c) Obedient to Jesus Christ and continuously sprinkled by His blood – sprinkled meaning cleansed, forgiven, healed, made new, and placed in covenant relationship with Holy God! As the Church in 2020 we can and should claim these same affirmations. This is our position in Christ! The Triune God has chosen us, sanctifies us, and continuously sprinkles us with the blood of Jesus so that we can live in obedient relationship with Him and live out His Kingdom's values! Does that warm your heart? It should! The God who made us, is forever at work in us!

And even on our worst days, these affirmations remain true because our position before God, our relationship with Him, isn't dependent upon what we do; it is all about what God has done and continues to do for us! Peter writes these words to believers that he was privileged to personally lead to faith. He writes to encourage them and remind them of the truth of their status before God! Let's receive his gift of encouragement. Let's allow these truths to sink deep into our souls and lift us up in these difficult days.

Peter ends his introduction with two words that I have always loved: Grace and Peace (verse 2b)! Grace; the unmerited, loving favour of God! Peace; the claim assurance that all is well because God is Sovereign! And Peter prays these "in abundance" over believers then and now! Are you experiencing that grace and peace? It is available to you through our great and glorious Triune God!

When we know who we are in Christ and experience God's grace and peace in our lives, praise flows! And so Peter encourages his readers (including us today) to offer praise "to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (verse 3a) -- a God who has made Himself known. He came to us, taking the form of humanity, in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus lived out the lovingkindness of God before the world as He ministered to God's people. Peter's initial readers weren't direct witnesses to that ministry, nor are we, but through the faithful proclamation of direct

witnesses (available to us today through the Word of God) and through the eyes of faith granted by God Christians in all ages are able to know Him.

Verse 3 reminds the readers that He is a God of great mercy through whom they have received abundant gifts. These gifts are ours today too! (a) New birth – a new life, a new start, a fresh beginning of faith. (b) Living hope, based on the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead – this hope is living because it is hope in a Living Lord! God raised Him from the dead! It is hope in our own resurrection; our abundant and eternal life! (c) An inheritance that can't perish, spoil or fade – meaning nothing can diminish its glory, nothing can tarnish its beauty – it is an inheritance kept in heaven (the believer's true home), so the earth and its evil cannot touch it or mar it. This inheritance is indestructible, eternal!

(d) The protection (meaning shielding/guarding) of God's power; a protection that we believe in 'by faith'. Though we cannot always see it, we trust in it. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead is at work protecting our souls! God is watching over us. He is behind and before us, above and below us. At all times He is present to us, offering safety from the worst this world throws at us! This protection remains ours until our full salvation is revealed at Christ's return (the "last days"). It is powerful protection that we can depend upon because it is the protection of God's righteous right hand.

Are you praising God for these incredible, abundant gifts? Are you rejoicing in them each and every day? Take a moment now to offer prayers of thanksgiving for these gifts that He has mercifully and graciously offered to you.

Peter encourages his readers (which includes us) to rejoice greatly in all that God has done and is doing in us, even though “for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials” (verse 5). That was certainly the experience of his first readers, and I’m sure many of us today are feeling tried in recent days. Joy unceasing is to remain ours even in the midst of the various trials that may test our faith while we remain in this world. Peter goes on in verse 7 to use the metaphor of gold refined by fire to show how trials actually strengthen and deepen our faith and, thus, should be viewed as gifts from God. Present-day trials are refining fires that help to prove the absolute worth of our faith. As we journey through trials, by God’s protection, we come to know with full confidence that what we believe about God and our relationship with Him is undeniably true. He is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble (Psalm 46:1). Peter goes on to say that this faith that we hold is of greater value than gold, which does fade and perish. Our faith, tried and proven through trials, is eternal. And the deeper and stronger our faith is, the greater the glory, honour and praise it brings to Jesus. And the greater the glory, honour and praise we

receive from Jesus! Are you hearing His, “Welcome done, faithful servant!”? It isn’t just reserved for the day He calls us Home. He speaks it into our souls every time we persevere through trial and remain firm in our faith!

In verse 8 Peter speaks of the reality of those first readers’ faith; a reality that is intended to be true of us today as well. “Though you have not seen Him, you love Him; and even though you do not see Him now, you believe in Him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls!” Take a moment to read and meditate on each of those phrases, letting their meaning sink deep into your heart and soul.

“Though you have not seen Him, you love Him!” Do you love Him? Deeply? Faithfully? How is that love expressed in your day-to-day walk with Him? Is it a love that gladly offers praise and thanks to Him, even in the midst of trials?

“Though you do not see Him now, you believe in Him!” In difficult periods, God can seem distant. It can be a struggle to see His hand at work. But even in those periods, we are called to continue believing ... to let our faith take us beyond our experiences or circumstances ... to keep trusting in His goodness even when it hurts. Are we people who believe, even when His faithful work in our lives isn’t readily seen? Are we people who walk by faith, not by sight?

“Filled with inexpressible (no words for it) and glorious joy!” Is that your story today? Is joy filling you? Is that joy so immense, so intense, so glorious that you can’t even put it into words? The Christian’s joy is more than ‘happiness’, which is so often dependent upon circumstances. Even in the midst of trials, the Christian’s joy can abound. It is a lightness of heart and soul that knows that “God is good” even if life isn’t! We are journeying through a period when life doesn’t feel too good, aren’t we? Are we, despite our present realities, declaring that God is good? Are we declaring that with joy in our hearts and smiles on our faces, knowing that these present sufferings are “for a little while” only (verse 6).

“You are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (verse 9). God’s saving work is never-ending in our lives. Our whole being (our very soul/our person/our essence) is being transformed by Him. Through His mercy we are continuing to become the people He has made/crafted us to be. We are works in progress, all of us, and trials and tests are part of the process of refining and re-making us. The salvation of our souls is a glorious thing. The prophets of old sought earnestly to understand how and when it would be accomplished in God’s people (verses 10-12). They gave witness to it, though the ultimate fulfillment of God’s salvation plan came long after they were taken from this earth. The angels in heaven “long to look into these things” (verse 12); human

salvation is a miraculous mystery even to them! How precious it is that we live in this age, the Church age, where salvation through faith in Jesus Christ has been offered by God to all humanity. We are blessed indeed! The goal of our faith is the salvation of our souls, and moment-by-moment, day-by-day, God is working to accomplish that goal fully! So give thanks and rejoice, even in the midst of suffering. Because His end goal for us is absolutely glorious! And little by little, we get to see it revealed in us as we stand firm and don't "peter out"!