



LIVING IN LIGHT OF HOPE

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When I was younger, I was fascinated by black holes. As I understand them, they are pockets in space that are created by stars. Apparently black holes are stars that were so dense that they imploded, crushed by their own mass. You can only pack so much matter in one spot.

This morning we're starting a 3 week study of the book of 1 Peter. Peter has come about as close as he can to creating a Bible black hole. He has packed so much into these verses. This letter is extremely dense with meaning and the more you read it, the more you discover.

It's a great letter to look at together as a church. Martin Luther thought it was one book of the Bible that contained everything a Christian needed to know.

1 Peter is called that because it was written *by* Peter – not *to* Peter. It's somewhat different from Paul's letters, in that Peter wrote it as a general letter to Christians throughout the Roman world, whereas most of Paul's letters were written to tackle specific issues in individual churches. So it is sometimes easier to apply Peter's message across the board.

Peter was also writing to churches that existed in times when it was tough to be the church. The culture around them was not supportive of their beliefs. The church was experiencing hard times. That lends additional timeliness to Peter's message for us. As our country's culture has shifted over the last 50 years or so, we now find ourselves living in a time when Christianity no longer enjoys the same public favor it once did. There is a greater gap between Christian values and American culture than there used to be. How should we function in that kind of environment? Peter offers some insight.

1 Peter 1:1-12

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, 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.

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, 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. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith-of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire-may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. 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.

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.

Everything we will look at in this letter flows from Peter's concept of hope. Hope is one of the most unique characteristics of the Christian faith. It's central. Compare Christianity to just about any other religion in the world, and you can see the distinction pretty quickly. You won't find another belief system that has such a strong sense of hope at its core.

Peter says that hope should shape the way we live. It should shape how we view the world. And over the next three Sundays, we will look at what that means.

But there's some groundwork to lay first. If we're going to talk about how important this hope is, we have to understand what it is first. And we have to have some clarity about why we have hope in the first place. Peter gives us all that and more in the verses we just read.

He begins by addressing his letter to God's elect. That in itself could be a huge discussion. Who are God's elect? It's an important question, because Peter seems to think it is these "elect" who have hope.

We're all familiar with the process of election. It's an election year. It's the process by which people are chosen to serve in office. We elect them. No matter how you feel about politicians, one thing is true: Nobody elects themselves. It's done by somebody else.

God's elect are elected by him. They're chosen by God. This gets into all kinds of philosophical questions about whether or not we have a free will or whether everything is predestined by God.

The answer seems to be yes. Yes we are asked to make free choices, and yes, God seems to know who will respond to him. The bottom line is that God's elect are those that have responded to God and said, "I believe Jesus died to bring me forgiveness and that through him I can have a relationship with God."

Paul spoke to this dual aspect of election when he wrote to the Ephesians.

Ephesians 1:11-14

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

The bottom line is that Peter says this hope he's talking about is for God's elect, but that doesn't mean some exclusive group. It means the people who have responded to God and believed in Jesus. You are included in God's chosen people by his invitation AND when you choose to put your faith in him.

Peter says that when we do that, two things happen to us. First, we become strangers in this world. Home is no longer here. But the word he uses for stranger is the one that you could use for a resident alien. We're foreigners, but we live here. Our allegiance is to our true home, our heart needs to be in our true home, but we still have a responsibility for how we live while we're here. Peter will revisit this theme throughout the book.

The second thing Peter notes about God's elect is that they are scattered abroad. It pulls up a lonely image – we're like foreigners who not only have been plucked out of a different country but who have been blown like dandelion seeds, separated from each other. Scattering can make you think of some oppressive government, breaking up a gathering of protesters, with people running in every direction.

Scattering has other purposes though, too. If you're planting grass seed, you need to scatter it in order for it to grow. If all the seed is left in a pile, you won't get any grass – you'll just get rotten seeds. God uses the scattering of his people as an intentional way of bringing growth.

Peter says we are strangers and we're scattered. But in this state, we still have hope. In fact, Peter talks about this hope like it is such a great thing that being strangers and scattered doesn't even matter.

So what do we know about this hope?

THE SCOPE OF OUR HOPE

We can use the word HOPE as an acronym to help us remember some of Peter's main points.

H -- Historically grounded

When we use the word hope, we often use it in a wishful sense. "I really hope it happens." "Hopefully, this will work."

Hope can feel tentative or like it's just pie-in-the-sky dreaming. But Peter says the hope we have is different because it is historically grounded. There is factual reality behind it that makes it sure.

In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...

I said earlier that Christianity offers unique hope, and this is exactly why. No other faith has at its center a figure who conquered death and offers his victory to all who want it. That's why Peter calls this a living hope – it is vital and strong and alive because of Christ being alive.

It is the resurrection that gives us a hope that there is something beyond the grave. And although we don't spend most of our time thinking about dying, knowing that death isn't the end is the most powerful kind of hope there is. It might feel childish to say that you became a Christian so you could go to heaven someday, but there's nothing childish about the search for meaning. And if all you work for in life ends at your death, then any talk of meaning doesn't mean much.

Job 17:13-15

*If all I have to look forward to is a home in the graveyard,
if my only hope for comfort is a well-built coffin,
if a family reunion means going six feet under,
and the only family that shows up is worms,
Do you call that hope?
Who on earth could find any hope in that?*

Having faith in God can give you a great deal of comfort when life is hard. But the hope of Christianity is not just to have a better life here. That's not enough consolation to endure being scattered strangers. Paul said,

1 Corinthians 15:19

If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.

There's a movie currently in theaters called *The Terminal*, in which Tom Hanks plays a man whose country is overthrown in a coup while he is on an airplane to the U.S. When

he arrives, his passport is no longer valid because his country has ceased to exist. He can't leave the airport, because without a valid passport he doesn't have a legal right to be in the country. So he's stuck.

Think of death as the airplane we all board from this world. When we die, this world ceases to exist for us. Without Christ's resurrection as our passport, we have no legal right to take part in life beyond death. We are hopeless.

The fact that Christ rose from the dead to live again offers proof of a reality beyond this life. And Jesus himself said plainly that his life could be ours.

John 11:25

I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies.

It's not a guessing game. It's not wishful thinking. Our hope is historically grounded in the resurrection. Not only is it grounded, it's also

O - Outrageously good

Look how Peter put it:

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...

The more we understand the hope that is ours, the more we come to appreciate it, to the point where we can't even find the words to describe how great it is. According to Peter, it is good enough to fill us with an inexpressible joy.

I could probably count on my hands the number of times I have felt what I would call inexpressible joy. And almost all of them were joy mixed with relief. There have been times when I lost something really important, and then found it, and felt this wave of joy. When my dad came out of his heart surgery okay would be another time. When an enormous burden of dreading the worst is lifted and replaced by good news, you can't contain the joy.

Peter says the reason we're filled with this joy is because we're receiving the goal of our faith – the salvation of our souls. Death no longer holds fear for us. The guilt of everything we've done wrong is lifted. The barrier between us and God has been wiped out. Those are all reasons for joy.

But I wouldn't describe myself as filled with inexpressible joy most of the time. If I happen to think about it, I'm glad for sure, but I quite honestly take it for granted.

The problem isn't that there isn't enough cause for joy – the real problem is that I'm not paying enough attention to that cause.

Dallas Willard writes this:

A popular saying is "Take time to smell the roses." What does this mean? To enjoy the rose it is necessary to focus on it and bring the rose as fully before our senses and mind as possible. To smell a rose you must get close, and you must linger. When we do so, we delight in it. We love it.

If anyone is to love God and have his or her life filled with that love, God in his glorious reality must be brought before the mind and kept there in such a way that the mind takes root and stays there.

We have an outrageously good hope. Are we close enough to it to smell it? Do we turn it over and over in our minds to get a full appreciation of how great it is? Peter tells us that when we do, we'll be blown away by how great this hope really is.

P -- Permanently guarded

Back in college, I was in a reader's theater production that included part of a Jesse Jackson speech. One of the lines from the speech that was repeated over and over was "keep hope alive...keep hope alive."

Peter tells us that when it comes to our true hope. We don't need to do that. It won't die.

and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade -- kept in heaven for you, 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.

Our hope is guarded for us in three ways. It can't perish, spoil or fade, it's kept in heaven by God and we're shielded by him here. That's triple protection like the toothpaste.

Hebrews 6:19

We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.

It is solid, and God isn't going to let anything happen to it. And hope needs his protection, because everything in life would try to steal that hope away from us.

I like the visual we started with this morning. Usually you see signs like this downtown in the most hopeless places, where people are at the end of their rope. Even in the worst conditions, that message of hope still is preserved for us and shines out like a neon sign.

Look at anything else you could stake your hopes on. Jobs change. Money runs out. Fame is fleeting. Beauty fades. Friendships fail. Children rebel. Health gives way. Houses deteriorate. Cars rust. Heroes fall.

Jesus never fails.

John 10:28

I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.

Our hope is secure because Jesus says it is secure, and he is always faithful.

Where else in life can you find something so solid, so reliable and so fantastic?

Our hope is historically grounded, outrageously great and permanently guarded. Finally, it is also

E – Even-now grace

Our hope is intended to be enjoyed now – not just something to cash in on when we die. Someone at work this week made a joke about me as a pastor being in the fire insurance business – as if I’m offering people a policy against the flames of hell.

Insurance is something you don’t use most of the time, though, and that’s not at all like the hope we have. Look again at Peter’s words:

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.

We have the joy NOW. We’re receiving the goal of our faith NOW. This is one hope that isn’t just for the future. It is so big that it spills over into the present and changes our lives for the good before we get to the end.

It isn’t that it eliminates hardship from our life – Peter acknowledges right in the passage we read that Christians have to put up with all kinds of trials just like everyone else. The difference is that when we look at suffering through the eyes of hope, it gives us a sense of purpose in it all that can help make the suffering more bearable.

Romans 5:2-5

And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

We were at Cannon Beach a couple week ago, and like all beaches, there were two different types of sand. The sand further from the ocean was dry and constantly shifting. It blew in your eyes as you walked through it and your feet would sink into each step.

Down closer to the water, the sand wasn’t going anywhere. Even though it was the same kind of sand, it was packed. The boys would dig down just a few inches and you’d see why – because the water was there, right below the surface. While you couldn’t build

anything out of the dry sand, you could take that wet sand and build all kinds of great sand castles and walls. And of course sometimes, they'd have to take a break and go jump in the waves, because that's what going to the ocean is all about.

The hard things in life are universal. It's the same sand everywhere. Without hope, without Christ, that sand swirls around us and we can't make sense of us. Having the hope of Christ inside us is like having the water that lets God shape what happens to us into something meaningful.

And of course, sometimes we get to take a break from the hard stuff, the sand. We get to just have a good time in the waves of hope that God's ocean of love brings our way. God has given us hope not just as an eternal reward but as a treasure to be enjoyed during our life on earth as well.

2 Corinthians 4:16

Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.

Where is your hope this morning? If you've never actually responded to God's offer of hope in Christ, you can do that today and begin having that security and joy and forgiveness we've been talking about.

Maybe you did that a long time ago. Are you still feeling the joy? Have you gotten distracted by other good things in life so that you mostly take your hope for granted?

Or is it the challenge of life that has diminished your sense of hope? Maybe it feels less than secure and you need reassurance that God isn't going to let you go.

God speaks to all those needs. His hope is real. His hope is indestructible. His hope is unbelievably good. And his hope is yours.

I'll close with these words from Paul:

Romans 15:13

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.