“A LIVING HOPE”

1 Peter 1:1–12

Key Verses: 1:3,4

“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. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you…”

Our hopes define who we are. So what are you hoping for? Be honest. We human beings have many hopes—hope to escape a bad situation, hope to have a happy family, hope to make a big success. But sadly, all our hopes in this life, even if we achieve them, eventually perish, spoil or fade. At the opening of this letter Peter reminds Christians of our new identity and our living hope. What is it? It’s our inheritance in heaven. But it can sound like a fairy tale. Is this hope real? How do we have it? Why do we need to be reminded of it? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

Look at verse 1a. “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ…” This letter was written by none other than Jesus’ top disciple, Peter. The Gospels show us that Peter had many weaknesses. He was impulsive and hot-headed; he depended on himself. Worst of all, he denied Jesus three times to a servant girl while Jesus was on trial. But after his resurrection Jesus reinstated Peter to be a shepherd of his flock (Jn21). Jesus sent Peter by his grace to spread his gospel to the world. Because Jesus sent him, he was an apostle of Jesus Christ. He had the authority of Jesus himself. If we want to know and follow Jesus, we need to listen very carefully to what his servant Peter wrote down in this letter.

Look at verse 1b. “…To God’s elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bythinia…” Peter was writing to Christians who were exiles, scattered in various places. Most likely they had to flee from persecution. Where were these places? They were all in what is now modern-day Turkey. At that time they were all remote places in what used to be called “Asia Minor.” Diverse groups of people lived in these places, spoke their own languages and had their own religions. But from the year 41 A.D. the Roman Emperor Claudius began colonizing this area. Some believe that when Claudius expelled Jews from Rome for creating a controversy over Christ (Ac18:1–3), many Roman Christians fled to live in the new colonies in these places. It’s hard to leave everything and move to a new place. It’s especially hard when we’re forced and have to do it quickly. And it’s hard to suddenly live among people we don’t know or understand. These exiled Christians were suffering in many ways—socially, economically, and emotionally.

But Peter tells them they are “God’s elect.” What does he mean? Look at verse 2. “…who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled by his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance.” Basically, these people had a very special identity: they belonged to Jesus. God the Father knew all about them. God’s Spirit was at work in their lives to sanctify them. Jesus shed his blood to forgive their sins and purchase them for God. They were so special and precious to God. Mainly, Peter is reminding them that they need to continue to be obedient to Jesus Christ. Though their situation has changed drastically, their relationship with Jesus should not change. Instead of thinking too much about themselves, others or their situation, they need to remember what Jesus has done and focus on being obedient to him. Though they face many difficulties, in Jesus they can have grace and peace in abundance.

What does Peter write to them first? Read verse 3. In Greek this verse begins one long sentence that actually ends in verse 12. Despite their suffering Peter urges them to praise God—praise him for the great thing he has done for them. What is it? God raised Jesus from the dead, and through his resurrection God gives all who believe in him “new birth into a living hope.” It’s true both for them and for us. Before believing in Jesus, we all were dead in our transgressions and sins. We just followed the ways of this world, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. We were without hope and without God in the world (Eph2:1–3,12). But when we repent and believe in Jesus, God gives us the Holy Spirit, and we are born again (Jn3:3–8). We’re made alive in Christ. We experience God’s great mercy who saves us from our sins. We’re no longer under the power of death. We no longer live in despair, or with all kinds of small, petty hopes which are really no hope at all (Ro8:24). Now we have the living hope of the kingdom of God. We have a new identity as God’s children. The world around us can be so discouraging and hopeless, going in the wrong direction, but this living hope keeps burning in our hearts.

To emphasize this, Peter says more about it. Read verse 4. Often Christians live so generously that they have nothing left for themselves. Others lose everything through persecution. But everyone who believes in Jesus has an inheritance kept for them in heaven. It’s so different from a human inheritance. In agricultural societies people inherited a farm, including animals and crops. It was real wealth, but it was vulnerable. The animals could die of disease. The crops could rot or be wiped out by a rainy season. In the industrial world people inherit money. But such an inheritance also quickly vanishes. After all the taxes and bills are paid, if there’s any money left over, it doesn’t last. People can squander an inheritance by buying all kinds of things they don’t really need, or by investing it in losing enterprises, or by sharing it with people who just make use of them.

But our inheritance in Jesus can’t be eaten up or wasted or taken away by anyone else. Peter says it’s “kept in heaven for you.” He means it’s an eternal treasure with our name written on it by God. People try so hard to preserve their earthly treasures with security systems and insurance policies. But our heavenly treasure is more secure than a Swiss bank account or an ancient treasure buried deep at sea, because God himself is keeping it for us.

Look at verse 5. The word “shielded” here implies that Christians are being attacked. Sometimes we’re attacked by people, but it’s really the devil always trying to take us down and destroy us. But as we live by faith, Peter says we’re shielded by God’s power. Every believer has an invisible spiritual shield given by God to protect us. What a comfort! God is in ultimate control of all things, working to reveal his salvation to his people when Jesus comes again. Nothing and no one can stop God’s purpose to bring his people to their eternal, heavenly home.

So how should we respond to this? Read verse 6. Our living hope in Jesus should cause us to greatly rejoice, no matter what we’re going through right now. Why were these people suffering grief in all kinds of trials? It was simply because they believed in Jesus. But their faith wasn’t superficial or hidden; it made them different. They had a different goal from most people, and different values and morals. They didn’t live for pleasure. They didn’t live selfishly. They lived for Jesus. They humbled themselves and denied themselves and served others.

But their difference made them objects of ridicule. People laughed at Christians and thought of them as strange. They were taken advantage of. They were spoken ill of. Sometimes they were treated harshly. Like all human beings they had their share of life’s trials, but they also had the added trials that come from following in Jesus’ footsteps, suffering to save others. It caused them “grief.” Christian suffering is real, and it’s hard. But Peter says that when we suffer, we greatly rejoice. It’s because our faith helps us not to lose heart or get bogged down; it helps us keep looking ahead to all God’s promises to us in Jesus.

But why does God allow his special and precious people to suffer grief in all kinds of trials? Read verse 7. Basically, God uses our sufferings to refine our faith. Some faith is fake. People may be quick to praise it, but such faith is not so deep, it doesn’t last, and in the end it’s shown to be a fraud. On the other hand, some faith is proven genuine. It’s deep and lasting, and in the end, those with genuine faith will receive praise, glory and honor from our Lord Jesus himself.

How can we have genuine, proven faith? It’s through trials. Trials refine our faith. Trials make our faith go deeper. Trials challenge us to persevere and rely on Jesus more. Trials eventually produce the character of Jesus in us. When we suffer grief in all kinds of trials, instead of complaining or despairing, we should see that God is helping our faith to grow.

What does proven, genuine faith look like? Read verses 8,9. We can’t fully understand or explain it. But genuine faith produces real love for Jesus in us. Genuine faith also fills us with inexpressible and glorious joy. This love and this joy come not from our circumstances, but from faith in Jesus. To outsiders this love and joy may seem irrational. But we have a very good reason for our love and joy—we know that in the end our Lord Jesus will save our souls.

Look at verses 10–12. Here Peter mentions the Old Testament prophets who predicted the sufferings of Jesus and the glories that would follow. He says that by searching intently and with the greatest care, trying to listen to the Spirit, they were actually serving these scattered Christians, and eventually us. He also mentions those who preached the gospel to them by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. He says that even angels long to look into these things. Basically Peter is emphasizing how blessed believers in Jesus are. What’s the blessing? Peter says it’s “the grace that was to come to you.” Who are we? In our sins we are nobodies; we’re nothing but losers and failures and people who should be forgotten. But through the suffering and resurrection of Jesus we receive God’s amazing grace, the forgiveness of all our sins and a living hope in heaven.

In these twelve opening verses of his letter Peter emphasizes our new identity and living hope in Jesus. We may be going through all kinds of trials. Humanly speaking we may feel insecure, empty-handed, isolated, or even despised. What do we really need? We don’t need our situation to get better, or our sufferings to be taken away. We need to be reminded of who we are, and of our living hope in Jesus. Though sometimes we may feel like exiles, we are God’s elect. Though sometimes we may feel overwhelmed by grief in all kinds of trials, we need to remember our living hope, our inheritance in heaven, the salvation of our souls, through the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So, who are you? What are you hoping for? These two questions are related. In his great mercy may God grant each one of us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. May he fill each one of us with love for Jesus and with the inexpressible and glorious joy that comes from him. And may he renew in us a clear identity as his special and precious people whom he wants to use today in this dark world.