

Is There Any Hope?

Series: Tried By Fire

1 Peter 1:1-5

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The book of 1 Peter is found in the section of the New Testament we usually refer to as the "general epistles" the nine letters from Hebrews through Revelation which concludes the New Testament. They have called them general epistles because the writers have addressed them to Christians in a general geographical area, rather than to specific churches as so many of the apostle Paul's letters are. They have another distinguishing characteristic: they are very Jewish. They were, in the main, written by the three men who were designated the pillars of the church in Jerusalem James, Peter, and John. Only two of the nine were not written by these men. Since their ministry was primarily to Jews, and they themselves were Jews, the books have a definite Jewish cast. They are not written specifically to Jewish people, except probably for Hebrews and James, but they have that point of view. However, none are addressed exclusively to Jews; they apply to Gentiles as well.

The little book of 1 Peter is a letter of hope. That is its theme, recurring throughout the book. Hope is a commodity which is in short supply these days. The world looks pretty hopeless. It has lots of problems, and lots of things wrong with it. So we certainly need to have some understanding of where hope lies.

Is there some real basis for hope in the world today? I am not particularly an analyst of trends, but it has been interesting to me to see what is happening currently. This great wave of nostalgia, the interest in going back into history to find some basis for hope in the future, seems to be something new. The notion is that we can go back into the twenties and thirties, live as they lived then, and somehow gather from that era of history the fortitude to live for the future. But it appears that even this idea is beginning to wane. I saw a graffiti the other day which said, "Nostalgia ain't what it used to be." People are looking for another basis for hope. Peter gives us that basis. It rests on some undeniable facts, as we will see as we study the book together.

It will be helpful to provide something of the historical background of this book. It is difficult to understand the messages of any of these letters unless we understand the circumstances to which they were addressed. The apostle Peter was the author of this book. We know from the book of Acts that he was the leader of the band of apostles in Jerusalem for a time, until he was placed in prison. After his imprisonment, it evidently was dangerous for him to remain in Jerusalem, so, Luke says, he went to some other place. We do not know precisely where that place was. He returned to Jerusalem for the council which determined the relationship of Gentiles and Jews in the church, and after that he disappears again from the narrative of Scripture, except for one brief mention which Paul makes in the book of Galatians. It appears from secular history that Peter traveled extensively throughout Asia Minor with his wife, planting churches in the area known today as Turkey. Paul spent most of his time in the provinces of Asia and Galatia in Asia Minor; Peter traveled throughout the other regions.

That was the responsibility of the apostles. They were church planters. In the first century the apostles went all over the then civilized world, establishing groups of believers. We know that Thomas and Bartholomew went as far east as India. Mark, who was not an apostle but was an associate of the apostles, went to North Africa and established the church in Alexandria. Paul went to the west, perhaps as far as Spain or even Britain, and established groups of believers there. These apostles went wherever they could, planting churches. Peter's assignment evidently was Asia Minor, and he was there for some period of time.

About A.D. 63 he went to Rome. It was around this time that Paul was released from his first imprisonment in Rome and went off to the west. We do not know why Peter came to Rome. Perhaps it was because Rome had

become the center of Christian activity. He arrived just prior to the outbreak of the Neronian persecution, the greatest wave of persecution the church has ever experienced. It began about A.D. 64 when, as you know, a great fire swept through the city and almost the entire western section was destroyed. The early historians said that even though Nero himself probably set it, he blamed the Christians. He was never able to make that charge stick, but he did succeed in convincing the people that the Christians were enemies of society. So a great wave of persecution broke out. Tacitus, one of the early Roman historians, said that most of the Christians in Rome lost their lives during this time. From A.D. 63 to 68, Christians by the thousands died in the city of Rome. This was the time when they met in the catacombs, because they were not able to meet openly, and the name of Christ was illicit. They were hounded and persecuted to death. In the next decade the persecution was carried on by Domitian, out to the limits of the Roman Empire, and then by Trajan. Even until the time of Constantine, Christians were persecuted and killed.

The apostle Peter himself was martyred during the first stage of persecution, put to death by Nero, as was the apostle Paul.

Paul was beheaded on the Appian Way, outside the city of Rome. Peter was crucified, as the Lord had predicted, upside down in one of Nero's gardens within the Vatican Hills. In doing some recent archeological excavating under St. Peter's Cathedral, they discovered an ancient pagan burial site, a Roman cemetery. And right under the high altar they found a small shrine, called a "martyrium," which was erected over the grave of an early martyr. Because they found this site in a pagan cemetery, which Christians ordinarily would not pick for a holy site, they believe that this may be the actual burial place of the apostle Peter. At any rate, we do know that both Peter and Paul lost their lives in this first stage of persecution.

It was just prior to this, about A.D. 64 or 65, that Peter wrote this letter to believers in Asia Minor, to warn them of the persecution which was coming. He could see the handwriting on the wall. He knew that this would be a different type of persecution, an imperially administered persecution, rather than mere attacks on the part of individuals, one which would be political in nature. And so he wrote to warn them. He says in chapter 4, "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you; but rejoice, inasmuch as you are partakers of Christ's sufferings. That is, "Christ lost his life - you may lose your life." His warning is to prepare them for this time. The recipients of this letter are described as people scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia - Roman provinces in Asia Minor. These may be actual groups of believers that the apostle Peter himself established.

The book itself has two divisions. The first section is from chapter 1 through chapter 2, verse 11. The theme of this section is salvation. As you know, in the New Testament salvation is depicted in terms of three tenses. There is salvation in the past, salvation in the present, and salvation in the future. Salvation in the past is the act by which God takes us out of a lost world and places us into his family. Then there is a salvation which is going on now, the process God is working out in our life. And there is a future salvation, when Jesus himself comes back to set things right. It is this future salvation which Peter emphasizes. Paul emphasizes past and present salvation; Peter, future salvation. This is another indication of the beautiful balance you find in Scripture. Peter's concern, although he touches on other matters, is the destiny of the Christian, which is ultimate salvation.

The second section of the book begins with chapter 2, verse 12, and continues to the end. It has to do with suffering. Suffering, Peter says, has to do with the discipline of the Christian. Suffering is part of the process by which God prepares us for this ultimate salvation, and the expectation of this ultimate salvation is the thing which keeps us stable and secure while we are undergoing present suffering. The book is easy to remember in this way. The first section -- the destiny of the Christian: salvation; the final section - the discipline of the Christian: suffering.

The book begins with a brief introduction which amounts to a short course in salvation. Peter packs a number of very profound truths in a few short statements:

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of

God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, that you may obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in fullest measure.

The author identifies himself here as Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ. He was born Simon the son of John. Jesus named him Peter. Peter was his Greek name; Cepheus was the Aramaic equivalent. Both mean "stone" or "rock". Peter will pick up this figure at another point in the book and dwell upon it, stating that we believers are living stones joined to a precious cornerstone, which is Jesus Christ himself.

The thing which strikes me about Jesus' referring to Peter as a stone is that when Peter was called, he was anything but a stone. He was a rash, passionate sort of person, governed by his moods. He was a man of great intentions, but the sort of person who always did everything wrong, who one moment was willing to defend his Lord against a Roman cohort, and the next moment turned in fear when ridiculed by a girl. That was Peter. Yet the Lord called him a stone, a rock, which is a picture of stability. The striking thing about this picture is that the Lord never chooses us on the basis of what we are, but on the basis of what we are to become as he works in our life. He always sees us in terms of the eventual product, which is conformity to Jesus Christ. When he looked at Peter, he saw him as a stable man, a man who could stand in the face of anything. Subsequent history proved that to be true. But when he first called Peter, he was anything but stable.

I do not know about you, but there are many times when I do not like my behavior. I have just recently become the father of a teen-ager. I used to work with high school kids for the YMCA, and I used to say, "I will never treat my kids the way those fathers treat their kids!" But I hear myself saying to my teen-age son the very same things those fathers used to say to their sons! And I hate myself for it. I am determined I'm not going to be that kind of father, and I turn around and do it anyway. I am doing a lot of apologizing these days, I find.

But the Lord does not see me as that kind of individual. He sees me in terms of what I will be. That is a great encouragement and comfort to me. It keeps me from getting bogged down and discouraged, and giving up. Some of you know who Gutzon Borglum was. He was the sculptor responsible for those magnificent rock sculpture portraits of the presidents on Mount Rushmore. In one of his biographies there is a story about his housekeeper, who was quite a fan of his. She was taken to the site before he began to work. And when he finished the work, she was taken again. As she looked up into those faces, she turned to Mr. Borglum and said, "How did you know that Mr. Lincoln was in that rock?" That is the way the Lord looks at us. We may see ourselves as some irregular, unformed piece of rock, and yet the Lord sees his own image in us. He sees the character and personality of Christ himself. And he is not primarily concerned with where we are now. He sees us in terms of the finished product. He sees us as individuals demonstrating the life and character of Jesus Christ.

Peter says two things to those who receive the letter. He calls them "aliens." There is something very distressing about being an alien. He is referring here in a symbolic way to the fact that these believers did not really belong in Asia Minor. They did not belong in Palestine. They did not really belong anywhere on this earth. Their loyalty really was to the Lord and to the city of God, not to any earthly city.

Being an alien is sometimes very frustrating, because you feel rootless and anxious without a homeland. So he couples with this description of them another statement. Not only are they aliens, but they are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God. The fact of my election is both comforting and discomfoting to me. It is comforting because it is wonderful to know that God chose me that I am accepted. That gives me a very warm and secure feeling.

When I was a kid growing up in Dallas, Texas, I used to get up every Saturday morning and, as soon as I had finished my chores, I would make a beeline for the park, because that is where all the kids would gather. We did not have Little League baseball, Pop Warner football, and all the other fine organized team sports they have today. We would all simply get together and choose up sides and play whatever sport happened to be in season. I can remember what a great feeling it was to be chosen for a team, to realize that somebody recognized all your fine talents, and that you were accepted! You had a place for the day. You did not have to stand on the outside looking in, but you belonged. It gives me a great deal of security to know that God has chosen me, and that I belong to

him. He selected me, and he selected you.

But it is also very discomfoting, because I cannot understand how we could be chosen, yet at the same time exercise our free will. Yet the Scriptures say both. On one hand you have these statements of the absolute sovereignty of God. His sovereignty is not relative; it is absolute. He has called us into a relationship with himself. On the other hand, you have all the statements which are appeals to the will of man ~Whosoever will may come," "Whosoever believes has eternal life" -- and I cannot reconcile the two. I do not understand. We spent two hours in a Bible study course I led last quarter trying to understand that paradox. We will never understand it. The Scriptures tell us that both are true. We say, "If one is truth, then the other cannot be!" But the Bible says both are true. I merely have to rest in that.

One of the early Christians, Tertullian, said with reference to the Scriptures, "They are incredible; therefore, I believe." Now, he did not mean that we have to give up our reason, because the Scriptures appeal to reason. The position that the Word takes is that we reason to the point of faith. They appeal to our rationality. So that is not what he meant. He meant that the Bible is such an incredible book that it could not have been put together by any mere man. There has to be a Higher Intelligence who put it together, because if man were writing this book, he would have cleaned it up and made everything so tidy that there would have been no seeming contradictions. But when I read this book, I discover all sorts of things I cannot figure out. Therefore, I know that there must be a Higher Intelligence who wrote it. And therefore I believe. That is Tertullian's point. And that is where we have to rest. This is God's Book. We can expect antinomies and paradoxes and other things which distress us, because that is the nature of God. We have to accept that.

Peter tells us in detail the various aspects of this choice. We are chosen "...according to the foreknowledge of God the Father by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, [in order] that [we] may obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with his blood." All members of the Godhead are brought together to accomplish God's purposes. The Father foreknew us. That is the foundation of his choice.

I know what might be going through your mind. Perhaps you are thinking, "Okay, that is the way you reconcile sovereignty and free will! God foreknew those who would choose him. He knew that they would choose him. And so on the basis of their choice, he chose them." I wish it were that neat. But that does not work! The word which is translated "foreknowledge" does not mean that God foreknew certain things about us. There is another term Peter would have used to express that. It means that God actually knew, in a personal, experientially way, the people whom he chose. He already had a love relationship with you from eternity. And on the basis of that relationship, he chose you. This is the foundation of everything God is doing. He loves you. The foundation of our life in Christ is not that we know "what," but that we know "Whom." We know Him.

Then, having loved us, he sent the Holy Spirit to sanctify us. As you probably know, this term means "to put [something] to its intended purpose". The Holy Spirit is sent by the Father, with all of his resources and power, to bring about the purpose God has in mind for us. All of his resources are available to accomplish the purpose of God in our life, to the end that we might obey Jesus Christ. Anywhere you look in Scripture, this is where all truth is directed toward obedience to Jesus Christ, toward making Jesus Christ Lord. We really do not have the option to call ourselves believers and then live any way we please.

If this passage ended right here, I think I would be terribly distressed, because I have a very difficult time obeying Jesus Christ. If this were all the passage said, then I would have to believe that the process broke down some place: either God did not foreknow me, or the Spirit had not sanctified me, or something had gone wrong. Because quite frequently, I do not obey.

Fortunately, it does not stop there. It says that this process is directed toward obedience, but also toward being sprinkled with his blood. Any Jew would know what Peter was talking about. He is referring to the worship in the tabernacle, and the sprinkling of the blood on the articles which were used in the tabernacle, and on the priests, and upon the people. This is a picture of cleansing, of forgiveness. The New Testament counterpart is Paul's statement in Ephesians 1: "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the

riches of His grace, which he lavished upon us." This means that when I fail to obey Jesus Christ, there is always forgiveness, an infinite kind of forgiveness, a forgiveness which never stops. We come to the Lord and we say, "I did it again. In fact, that's the 491st time I did it again!" And the Lord says, "You did what?" I don't even remember. It is forgotten."

Do you believe that? When Christ died for you and for me that was an infinite payment. And you can never go too far, or do too much, or do it too many times, so that you go beyond the work of the cross for you. There is infinite forgiveness. I do not care how many times you fail to obey Jesus Christ. There is always forgiveness. John said, "If we confess our sins, he [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." In Psalm 130, David said, "If thou, Lord, shouldst mark [list, keep record of] iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with thee that thou mayest be feared [reverentially trusted]." One of the greatest incentives to holy living is the realization that God keeps on forgiving us. When we fail, we can pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, thank God for the forgiveness which is ours, and move on toward the obedience he has promised.

In these brief verses Peter brings together what seem to me to be the most important factors in the Christian life. There is, first of all, an *eternal relationship* with God. We are loved by God. Then, the Holy Spirit provides the *power* to be what God wants us to be. The result of all of God's power is *obedience* to Jesus Christ. And when we fail to be what we know God intends us to be, there is always *forgiveness*.

As I indicated earlier, Peter's concern in the opening section is with the issue of salvation. In verses 3 through 5 he gives us a portrayal of what that salvation is:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

It is characteristic of Jewish writings to include a benediction in the opening words, and this is what Peter does: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

All that God has done for us, Peter says, is the result of God's mercy. Do you know what mercy is? Do you know the difference between grace and mercy? He has referred in verse 2 to grace which is multiplied to us, i.e., increased geometrically. Now he refers to mercy. Grace is God's favor for those who do not deserve it, God's kindness poured out for the worthless. Mercy is God's favor extended toward those who are helpless. It always helps me to think of the cartoon characters in "*Peanuts*." If you're kind to Lucy, that's grace; if you're kind to Charley Brown, that's mercy!

Tell me, where in the Bible does it say, "God helps those who help themselves"? Actually, that does not come from the Bible; it comes right out of the Pit! The Bible says just the contrary -- God helps those who are helpless. God helps those who are sunk, who are beat, who have had it, who can't go any further, who have done too much, and have done it too many times, who have gone too far. That is whom mercy is for. It is for those who are absolutely, abjectly helpless. That is the kind the Lord reaches out for. The writer of Hebrews says that we have a high priest who can be "touched with the feeling of our infirmities," because he has gone through the very same things we have gone through. Therefore, we can go "boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and may find grace to help in time of need."

The focus of these verses is the new birth. It is according to his great mercy, the result of which is that he has caused us to be born again. This is the counterpart of Paul's statement that we have been identified with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. The old life is so wretched that God cannot do a thing with it. He cannot reform it, he cannot dress it up, he cannot make it more acceptable; he just puts it to death. And out of the ashes of that old life he brings into being a new life, which Peter describes here as a new birth. It is something which must take place. Jesus said to Nicodemus "You *must* be born again." That is something God does for you and me when we

exercise faith in him. It is not something that we do; it is something we receive. When we receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, we are born again.

Have you ever thought that you would like to live your life over again? If you could start afresh, what would you do? If you could be reincarnated as you, knowing everything you know today, would you do any better than you did before? I know I would not. I would botch up my life the same way I have already botched it up, and would botch up any other subsequent life I might go through. That is why reincarnation has no appeal to me at all. It does not matter in what form I am reincarnated, I am going to ruin it before I am through. What I need is a new quality of life. And that is what God gives us. That is what the new birth is.

But, you see, it is a quality of life which is renewed day after day. It is not just a once-for-all thing. It is something which occurs every moment of the day. Paul says in Titus that it is "not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy [there is that term again] ...by the washing of regeneration [the new birth] and renewing by the Holy Spirit..." Every moment of every day is a new beginning. Paul says, "Though the outward man is perishing, the inward man is renewed day by day." Or to take an Old Testament illustration, Jeremiah, as he watched the city of Jerusalem burn, said, "It is because of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness." Paul said, "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." Every moment is a new beginning. We do not need to be tyrannized by our past, by failure, by weakness, by actions in our history which shame us and grieve us. Forget it! We are being renewed day by day.

Peter goes on to say that this new birth is to a living hope, and to an inheritance. First, a living hope, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. There are a number of places in 1 Peter where he refers to something living. In chapter 1, it is "the living and abiding word of God". In chapter 2 it is the "living stone", Jesus himself, upon which we are built as living stones. If you examine Peter's use of this term, you will see that he is using it in the sense that we use the word "dynamic" - something which is working right now, a hope which works in my circumstances today. If I look forward to all that God has for me, and ultimately to the resurrection life of Jesus Christ himself, the One who indwells me, then I have a *living* hope. I am able to cope with life now, in my circumstances, in whatever persecution I may go through, because my hope is based on all that I have in Christ, which Peter spells out in subsequent verses.

Secondly, the new birth is to the end that we might "obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for [us]." Any Jew would know what Peter meant when he referred to the inheritance, because every Jew looked for his inheritance in the Land, initially -- the land of Canaan which has been promised. That was the realization of all of their hopes and expectations. But he also would know that beyond that is God's city. Abraham himself did not look for a city which man built, but for God's city. Beyond the land of Canaan there was an inheritance. This speaks of all the good and noble and righteous ambitions we have in this life, which will be fulfilled in heaven. And ultimately these things are God himself. David says, "Whom have we in heaven, but God?" That is really what we are looking for -- when we will see him and will possess all that he is. C.S. Lewis says that our first words, in stepping into heaven, will be, "Of course!" That is, "It's just as I thought. Everything I ever wanted, everything I ever hoped for -- all the things I so desperately wanted but was inhibited from possessing -- is all right here."

Peter says that it is reserved for you, kept for you. Have you ever turned up at a hotel with great expectations of a relaxing vacation, only to discover that someone else has your reservation? It has happened to me. But the computer in heaven is not going to get fouled up! When you get there, all that you have, all that is coming to you, everything which is yours because of your relationship to God, will be yours. It has your name on it. It is reserved for you.

A couple of weeks ago I was working in my office, and my little boy came in and started rummaging through some of my desk drawers. He pulled out a little switchblade knife that Eric Sigward gave me a couple of years ago. He pushed the button and out flipped its tiny little blade. His eyes got as big as saucers, and he said, "Oh! Just what I've always wanted!" I said, "I'll tell you what, son. I'll give you the knife. We'll put it up someplace, and

when you're older you can have it." He said, "Now?" "No, we'll just have to wait till you're a little older, and at the right time, I'll give it to you." So I got a little box, because I knew it might get lost if I left it in the drawer, and I put it up on the top shelf of my closet, so that the box protruded over the edge of the shelf. I showed him where it was, and I said, "I'm going to keep it for you." For the last two weeks, whenever he gets bored, or things don't go very well, he comes running in and says, "Do you have my knife?" I say, "Yes, I do." "Can I see it?" "Okay, it's right there on the shelf. I'm keeping it for you, and at the right time it's going to be yours."

That is what Peter is saying. It is not time yet. There is a little more maturing that God has in mind for us. But our inheritance is preserved, it is kept for us, it is right up there. And this is what sustains us in times of trial not only the capacity to cope with life because of the resurrection life of Christ that we have right now that is the living hope -- but also the expectation of our inheritance, when everything will be set right. We will come into our own, and we will have everything that the father has destined us to have. That is our hope.

Father, we thank you for this encouraging word. And we are grateful to be told that we are kept, our faith is kept, and that our inheritance is preserved for us. We thank you for this, and for the security and peace of mind it gives us -- an inheritance which will never be defiled or marred in any way, but is kept intact. We look around us and see that so much of what we are attracted to and build our life upon is transient and prone to destruction. Thank you for an inheritance which will never be taken away, in Jesus' name, Amen.

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