

A Living Hope

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[0 : 0 0] I just want to spend a few brief minutes thinking about some of these words now. And I'm aware that everyone is probably tired and exhausted after a long weekend, so I'm not going to ramble on for too long.

This evening I want to focus in on a single theme drawn from the opening verses of this letter. And that theme is Hope. And we're going to look at this beginning to Peter's first letter to these Christians that are scattered throughout what's now modern-day Turkey.

And by the time that this letter was written, the church had grown and grown far beyond Jerusalem out into the Roman world. And Peter's writing to some of these early believers in the face of some of the challenges that they had.

Now these early Christians that Peter's writing to were people who were in no small need of hope. They were people who struggled, people who suffered a great deal for their faith. And this message of hope is one that is extremely relevant for us today.

People still need hope. Our friends, our family, our neighbours, the people of Enbora need hope. And I want to just think about three things about Christian hope from these opening verses.

[1 : 1 3] And the first is that our hope is rooted in the past. Secondly, our hope points forward to a future that's certain. And then thirdly, our hope is a present reality.

So we're going to look back, we're going to look forward, and then briefly we're going to look at the present, the here and now, why any of this stuff matters for us today. So first, our hope is rooted in the past.

Now that might seem like a strange thing to begin with when you're talking about hope. I think for a lot of people, hope is about leaving the past behind. It's about forgetting mistakes and looking forward to the future.

But we notice here in this letter that the first thing Peter does when thinking about hope is to look back. Christians will often use the language of a new birth, of being born again, which maybe gives you the idea of a fresh start, a clean slate, a new life.

But we're first pointed into the past to show us the means of how that happens. Verse 3, he says, in his great mercy, God has given us new birth into this living hope.

[2 : 2 1] How? Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Now there's a lot of churches today that will actually say that, you know, the resurrection, it doesn't matter if it actually happened as a historical event.

It's not crucial. It's just picture language for coming alive spiritually. Resurrection is maybe just about experiencing Jesus internally in your heart.

I think Peter and Paul and the apostles would say that that's nonsense. 1 Corinthians 15, Paul writes, if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless.

Essentially, your faith is useless. More than that, we are found to be false witnesses about God. For we've testified that God has raised Christ from the dead.

So Jesus' resurrection as a historical event, as something that actually happened in history in our world 2000 years ago, is hugely important.

- [3 : 21] It's not something that Christians can just agree to disagree on. Then when you read Peter's sermon in the Book of Acts at Pentecost, he says, God raised this Jesus to life.
- We are all witnesses of it. We saw this happen. The fact that Jesus actually died and actually came back from the dead is hugely important. So he's writing here in this letter to these early Christians that Jesus' resurrection is nothing less than instrumental to their new birth.
- They can have hope because Christ was raised. Because Christ was raised, their hope is not wishful thinking. It's not a kind of hope against hope. It's a real living hope. It's a confident hope. It's a sure hope.
- And that hope is rooted not just in the resurrection, but also in the cross. He goes on further in this letter to illustrate that. He talks about our being ransomed, our being held captive by sin at one time, and being set free through Christ on the cross.
- That cross is the decisive victory where sin was dealt with. It's what makes hope possible in the first place. The resurrection, he's saying, is what makes hope a living hope.
- [4 : 40] So these two things together, the death of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus, form this kind of anchor of Christian hope. And that's just what I kind of want to grasp first and foremost.
- That's why it's right at the beginning of Peter's letter. If we're wrong on that, it doesn't really matter if we're right elsewhere. It's interesting though, when Jesus died on the cross for Peter, it was his teacher, his friend.
- Peter was one of his closest followers. This Jesus whom he had placed all of his hope in, who he looked to as the one who would bring restoration to Israel and to free them from Roman oppression, ended up nailed to a cross.
- I think we can all understand what it feels like to have a hope snatched away almost cruelly. I'm a huge football fan, but over the last year, some friends have tried to get me into rugby.
- And I ended up watching the Rugby World Cup, I think in 2015. And Scotland in the quarterfinals, I think, were playing against Australia.
- [5 : 51] And I think right up to the last minute, they were ahead. Things were looking good. The rugby fans I was with were starting to dream about going on to actually win the thing, because Australia were probably the team to be.
- And then right in the last minute, Australia got awarded a controversial penalty, and Scotland were knocked out. And in the blink of an eye, the mood changed.
- That hope had been snatched away. It was replaced with a kind of bitter disappointment and anger. And I mean, I think Scottish football fans are probably got so used to that feeling that we probably don't bother getting our hopes up in the first place.
- But can you imagine how much worse Peter would have felt? He spent years following Jesus, years looking to Jesus as the one who he said, you are the Christ, you are the Son of God, you are the Messiah.
- To Peter's mind, Jesus wasn't supposed to die. That didn't fit in with his hope. But now we see in this letter that he's writing 40 years later or so, that hope is centred around the fact that Jesus didn't stay dead.
- [7 : 04] The resurrection is just so crucial. Peter came face to face with a Jesus who was risen, a Jesus who was physically breathing and talking and eating in front of him.
- One author wrote that at that moment hope was reborn in Peter's heart. That's why he's so excited about the resurrection. That's why he's writing this letter and opening with praise, saying, blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

You see, the resurrection did so much more than just bring his teacher back. It did so much more than just bring his friend back. The resurrection is what crowned Jesus' victory.

It showed that he had power over death, power ultimately over sin. Again, in his sermon at Pentecost, Peter said that the resurrection shows that God has made this Jesus Lord and Christ.

So Peter's hope is in a living Jesus. The resurrection is so central, not just because Jesus is alive, but because in him we are alive.

[8 : 15] Do we share Peter's appreciation of that? Do we get as excited about resurrection? It's not just something we should take out of a box at Easter, but it's something that should be first and foremost in our minds.

I think it's in total contrast to what some people think Christianity is all about. Some people think it's some kind of performance level, where you have to reach a certain level of morality.

You have to be somehow good enough with God. That's not hope. It's important how we live. Peter goes on in this letter in verse 13, in the second half of this chapter.

He says, as children of obedience, be holy. There's a certain way you ought to live, but he places that in its context. He reminds us first that Christian hope is dependent utterly on God's action, and what God has done through the gospel, through Jesus' death and resurrection.

It's anchored not in ourselves, but in God's mercy, in God's grace. So that's the first point, our Christian hope is rooted in the past.

[9 : 28] That's the basis, the foundation on which we can have hope. Secondly, hope looks forward to a certain future.

It's easy to throw a word like hope around as Christians without really thinking about what we mean by it. We might use it to cheer someone up, but it can be a bit vague.

It can be a bit ambiguous. What do we mean when we talk about our hope? Well, in the ancient world, Paul described the pagans around him as people with no hope, people who were hopeless.

And the world that was around Paul was an interesting world. It was full of great thinkers, it was full of great poetry, music, architecture. In many ways, it was a beautiful world, but ultimately it was a world without hope.

And despite how much that world has changed in the last 2,000 years, our world is still utterly without hope. People want hope, people like the idea of hope, the concept of hope, but they don't really know what it is, they don't really know where to look for it.

[10 : 36] I think you see that illustrated when you look at the news and people's response to it. Like over the last few years, the Syrian refugee crisis has left people feeling hopeless. People don't really have an answer to these kind of things.

We see so much injustice, we see suffering and poverty, and people don't really know what to say. See, despite all the advancements we've made in medicine, in science, in technology, in education, in agriculture and all these things, in general living conditions and health, people still don't have hope.

So as the church, as Christians, we have to be sure that we can articulate our hope, that we can speak hope into this world, to our family, to our friends, to the people out there.

Peter reminds us in this letter, first of all, that our hope is grounded in God's action in the past, but he goes on here to show how it points to a future.

He speaks in verse 4 about our hope and its content. He says, into an inheritance that can never perish, an inheritance that can never spoil or fade.

[11 : 49] Now that language of being born into an inheritance, it really reiterates what God does through the gospel. That he brings people who are hopeless, people who are abandoned and helpless into a family.

See, an inheritance is not something you can ever work your way towards. An inheritance by implication is something you are given.

So what is that inheritance? Well, the promise of an inheritance is rooted way back in Genesis. God came to a guy called Abraham and he made these promises to him, promises to put a broken world the right way up.

It's part of the big story of the Bible. You see, from Genesis to Revelation, the same story takes place. God created a good world. God created a world without all that suffering, without all that injustice and hopelessness, without evil and chaos.

God created us human beings to enjoy a relationship with him, a relationship that wasn't tainted by sin, that wasn't tainted by evil. And then what we read throughout the Bible as it progresses, as we saw in the mission of God series last term, is God's plan to put things right.

[13 : 07] God's plan ultimately being worked out through his son and through his people, through us, through the church. God's plan to put things right. God's plan to redeem and to restore.

And then Paul says in Galatians 3 that these promises made to Abraham and we see developed throughout Scripture, in Galatians 3, if you belong to Christ, you are Abraham's offspring.

You are heirs according to the promise. What that means is these promises made to Abraham are promises made to us. Promises of a new home, promises of a new restored relationship with God, promises of a new people, a new family.

God promises these things to us. And these are things that we begin to experience now as the church, as God's people. We get tasters of what this inheritance is ultimately going to be like.

But in the long term we look to the future to when these things are fully realized, when these things come in full. Peter goes on to say that this inheritance, this resurrection of Jesus rather, has not just made this inheritance possible, has not just given us hope, but it's made it secure.

[14 : 27] Read verse 4, he says that this inheritance is being kept for us in heaven. It's being kept secure. Not only is our inheritance being kept secure for us, but Peter says that we are being shielded by God's power.

We are being kept secure for that day. Again, we are reminded that it's not something that we have to try and work our way towards. It's something that is utterly dependent on God.

What God has done, what God is doing, and what God will do, it's something being kept secure. So thirdly, the Christian hope looks forward to a certain future.

And I know we're all tired, so I'm going to make the third point very brief. But the third point I have tonight is that it's also a present reality. Our hope is something that should impact the present.

It's something that should affect us now in our day-to-day lives. You might remember a few months ago, Corey was preaching, and he was speaking on this kind of idea of how having an awareness of what's coming in the future should radically affect the way you act in the present.

[15 : 37] I think he used a good illustration of two people being given the same mundane task. I think it was adding a widget onto a widget, and there was a widget involved.

But basically, the idea was that it's some really mundane task that they have to do, and it's for, I think, a year. And he said that these two people are offered different sums of money for this task.

The first person's offered some kind of paltry sum. That maybe sounds exciting at first, but once that person gets into the task, they realize that this really isn't worth my time. It's not all that great.

But the second person is offered, say, millions of pounds. Now, the two people are doing the same task, the same day-to-day thing, but they both have different expectations for what's coming at the end.

Now, if I've butchered your illustration, Corey, I do apologize. But the idea is the same, that if you have an awareness of what's coming in the future, what you hope for, it should radically alter how you live Monday to Friday, how you spend your weekend, how you treat people, how you speak to family and friends.

[16 : 46] So our third point this evening, just briefly, this hope is a present reality. It's real for us in the here and now. I think one of the dangers of taking a theme like hope like this and thinking about it and thinking about how awesome the new heavens and the new earth will be and how wonderful it will all be, we can get so caught up in that that we tend to neglect the present.

A common accusation of Christians is that we can be so heavily minded that we're no earthly good. And I think sometimes there's fairness in that. Sometimes Christians can become so consumed by the next life that we fail to act now.

We have to balance it by remembering that hope is something that is real in the present. Jesus Christ is alive today. Jesus Christ is alive now.

And Peter goes on to illustrate this by speaking about some very real earthly things. If you read the following verses, he speaks about how this hope helps us to be joyful now in the face of suffering, in the face of trials.

Verse 6, he writes, In all this you greatly rejoice, present tense, not future. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

[18 : 10] To contrary to what some people think, Christians are not immune to suffering. Christians are not given a ticket to an easy life. Christians all experience grief, we all experience pain, regret, tiredness.

We all experience death ultimately. Some of us are prone to certain problems, to certain trials. Some of us experience anxiety, stress, mental illness.

Some of us will experience addiction or temptations. But Peter is saying that our hope points us beyond these things.

Our hope shows us that this suffering is not part of God's ideal world. Suffering is something that exists now because our world has fallen. But Peter assures us here that in the grand scheme of things it is temporary.

He says at the end of this letter, he concludes in chapter 5 verse 10, After you've suffered for a little while perhaps, The God of all grace who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, Will himself restore, confirm, strengthen and establish you.

[19 : 22] Not only that, but he assures us here again in chapter 1, That God actually uses these sufferings, these trials, these earthly problems, As they're sometimes called.

He says in verse 7, That they've come so that the proving genuineness of your faith, Faith of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire, May result in praise, honour and glory when Jesus Christ is revealed.

None of us here have been made perfect yet. Our salvation is not yet fully realized. That's something that we know is future. But it's something we begin to experience in the presence, in the presence, sorry.

God's new creation, God's redemption, God's restoration begins with his people. And we are given that inheritance not as loyal subjects, Not as really hard workers, not even as faithful disciples, But as God's children, as people who have been brought into a family.

Verse John 3, verse 1, is one of my favourite verses in the entire Bible. See what great love the Father has lavished, that we should be called children of God.

[20 : 46] Think about how incredible that is. But people who are sinful, people who are inconsistent, people who mess things up, People who don't really deserve to know God's love, To be able to have this great inheritance given to us, To be called a part of his family.

It's incredible. Alistair I was speaking at the weekend away over the last couple of days, And I think his talks were recorded, so if you weren't there, definitely listen to them.

I don't want to spoil them, but he said one thing on Saturday morning that I thought was great. He said that he was speaking about adoption, and this idea of being brought into a family. He says that adoption means you are loved like Jesus.

You are as safe and secure as Jesus, because you're a son or daughter in him. So you're completely accepted and brought into that family.

A human family can be a great thing. A human family can be a wonderful thing. It can be a source of real blessing. But human families can be broken. Human families can be a source of pain.

[22 : 03] But following Jesus, being a Christian means being born into a new family. And being part of that family has certain implications. The one we've been looking at is this inheritance that you're given.

But it also has implications for how you live. It has implications for how you behave. We don't really have time to go into it tonight, but Peter goes on here in this letter to say, You know, therefore, because you've been born again, because you've been taken into this family, and given this incredible hope, be holy.

That's the context. That's the order. It should be a challenge to us, though, as Christians. You know, would people know the hope that we have by the way we live, by the way we act at work, by the way we act around our family or our non-Christian friends, by what we're like when we're relaxed and switched off?

When people look at us, would they be able to identify that hope? Would they be able to identify that there's something different about you?

Now, obviously, none of us have been made perfect. None of us have been transformed into a person who can be holy. But rather than feel despair over that or get down about our sin, we should be in awe at this hope that we have.

[23 : 31] We should be filled with this living hope that's grounded in God's mercy. We should be aware that God is beginning to transform us even now. God is working in our hearts today.

Just think again about the context here. The command to be holy here, it comes in the context of God's gracious action, of what God has done.

The desire to be holy is the response, not the requirement. Tim Keller put it well. I'm sure you've heard it before. He said that God sees us as we are.

He loves us as we are. But by His grace, He does not leave us as we are. So with an awareness of that and with that anticipation for Christ's return and that inheritance we will receive, our lives should be characterised by hope.

We have a mission to go and tell others about our hope. But it should also be seen in the way we live, in the things we do, in the social action and mercy ministries we're involved in.

[24 : 41] Care for the poor, helping those in need. As the church, we are part of God's work of renewal. We are to make hope known to the nations, to our family and friends, to our neighbours, our colleagues, to the people of Edinburgh.

So just to conclude and kind of wrap things together, we've looked at hope under three angles. We've been born again into a living hope, a hope that's planted firmly in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

It's a hope that looks forward to a certain future, to what God will do and all that incredible stuff. But it's also a hope that causes us to live transformed lives now in the present.

May God bless His word to us this evening and may He help us to live out hope in all that we do. Amen.