

Living with Hope in a Hostile World

Introduction

It doesn't take long to discover that our world is a hard world to live in. Though many of us live in relative ease and comfort, we've all felt the pangs of sin and the scrawls of fallenness. In a congregation this size, it's nearly impossible to go very long without the feeling the bite of our fallen world. Scripture says "weep with those who weep" and I've heard it say that if you know enough people you'll always be crying. Our world is one "subject to futility." History could make a stone weep.

Tim Keller, a pastor in New York and a good analyst of culture and theology wrote an article a few years ago titled "Big Issues Facing the Western Church." In a list of several issues, the 5th was "The End of Prosperity." The article created something of a buzz in the internet world, and a few days later he issued another article addressing how churches needed to be preparing for these "big issues." One of his major points was this:

"We must develop a far better theology of suffering. Members of churches in the west are caught absolutely flat-footed by suffering and difficulty... There are a great number of books on 'why does God allow evil?' but they mainly are aimed at getting God off the hook with impatient western people who believe God's job is to give them a safe life. The church in the west must mount a great new project--of producing a people who are prepared to endure in the face of suffering and persecution."

If there's one place that should be realistic about hardship it's the church, and if there's one place that should proclaim joy-filled, realistic confidence it's the pulpit. Yes it is true that our world is subject to futility (Rom. 8:20) but it's also true that it was done *in hope*.

A lot of churches are afraid of speaking about suffering for fear of sounding morbid or negative. But one might say that the Bible itself is morbid—full of blood and guts and sin and terror— and if we are to be faithful and accurate, we must strike the biblical balance between realistic horror and realistic hope. Yes the Bible is gory and blunt—but it's also the most hopeful, grace-filled text you can find. In fact, the reason it offers real hope is because it's realistic about the horror.

John Piper writes "The coddled Western world will sooner or later give way to great affliction. And when it does, whose vision of God will hold? Where are the Christians being prepared for global sorrows? Where is the Christian mind and soul being prepared for the horrors to come? Christians in the West are weakened by wimpy worldviews. And wimpy worldviews make wimpy Christians."

My aim for this morning's message is to take another step in developing our strong-as-steel worldview. We'll be looking at 1 Peter 1:3-5 and drawing out four considerations that will help us live with hope in our hostile world.

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, 2 according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood:

May grace and peace be multiplied to you.

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

Background

Just a little background before we get started. You'll notice that Peter is writing to a group of people he calls "elect exiles of the Dispersion." The dispersion was a word used to describe what happened when the Jews were persecuted and scattered abroad. They are exiles because they are not in their homeland, and they are elect because God has called them to salvation.

These people lived in a time, unlike ours, where it was incredibly difficult to be a Christian. Nero ruled from Rome and made Christianity a stigma. Rumors about Christians were propagated and they became known as a strange and separatist rebel movement. Because of their practice of the Lord's Table they were accused of cannibalism, because they refused to acknowledge the Caesar's deity they were called atheists (ironically), because they taught freedom in Christ they were accused of upsetting the social structures between slaves and slave-owners. They were Nero's perfect scapegoat when he was accused of "fiddling while Rome burned." It didn't take long for people to suffer simply for calling themselves Christian.

So Peter begins by calling them "elect exiles." They are exiles because of their suffering, their homelessness, the opposition they face; but they are elect because God has chose them for salvation.

Their situation, while different from ours, has many similarities. We do not face the aggressive, government-sanctioned persecution. Not yet, at least. But we are largely misunderstood. We are accused of being a problem in society. We are often dismissed as anti-intellectual. And the more secular our nation becomes the more persecution we'll face.

What do we do when suffering comes? How do we react when circumstances become overwhelmingly difficult? In essence, how can we live with hope in a hostile world? These questions are not just 1st century questions. Here is wisdom for the ages; answers to the questions we've been asking for millennia.

The principles we find here are not only for opposition against us. They also help us deal with sufferings and difficulty where there's really no one to blame. Sickness, disease, disaster. Peter's words help us live with hope in a hostile world.

1. Consider the Blessedness of God.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!

The way that Peter opens his letter is surprising. Imagine you've just received word from a missionary friend in North Korea. The tone of the letter is urgent. As you read, you're horrified at what is going on—the government is cracking down on Christians. Some are being tossed into prison. Fathers are being separated from mothers and children; others are fleeing the country secretly, attempting to escape the persecution. Some have been martyred. Say you received a letter with all this information. You're shocked, you're grieving, you're sad. So you pull out a pen and paper and begin to write. What do you say?

This is essentially what happened with Peter, and you know what he said? He said, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!"

In other words, he didn't even begin by addressing the problem. If one of us were to write the letter, it may have gone something like this: "Dear friends, we're so sorry for what has happened to you! We've heard about the pain and struggles you've been going through. We want you to know that we're praying for you!"

That might be good, but that's not how Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, addressed them. Instead of starting with attention to the grief he sets the focus on the God above the grief.

The first thing to consider as you prepare to be a hopeful Christian in a world of hostility is the blessedness of God.

A strong dose of the blessedness of God can cure any sorrow. Charles Spurgeon said this, and I find it to be not only beautiful but true:

"Oh, there is, in contemplating Christ, a balm for every wound; in musing on the Father, there is a quietus for every grief; and in the influence of the Holy Ghost, there is a balsam for every sore. Would you lose your sorrow? Would you drown your cares? Then go, plunge yourself in the Godhead's deepest sea; be lost in his immensity; and you shall come forth as from a couch of rest, refreshed and invigorated. I know nothing which can so comfort the soul; so calm the swelling billows of sorrow and grief; so speak peace to the winds of trial, as a devout musing upon the subject of the Godhead."

Notice also that Peter's opening sentence is praise—"Blessed be God!" This is exuberant. This shows us that the cure for ailing hearts is not simply *knowledge* of the blessedness of God, but *rejoicing* in the blessedness of God. We must learn to rejoice in the God-ness of God.

There are some people you meet in life that are unforgettable. I met a man like that two years ago. His name was Gus Bess—about 6'4," muscular build, with a deep, deep voice. He had two things about him I'll never forget. First, was this: he never called a trial a trial, he always called it an *opportunity*. When I say never, I mean never. I don't think *trial* was in his vocabulary. Sometimes it take a second to understand him because he'd be speaking about something he called an opportunity and we didn't realize he was talking about a difficulty. I like that perspective.

The second thing about him, and this relates to the point I'm making in 1 Peter, is that when he heard about a trial, a difficulty in a church, a hard circumstance, the first words out of his mouth, in his deep, deep voice, were always, "Praise God!"

This is what Peter does. He hears about this horrible persecution and instead of despairing he begins with "Praise God!" Preparation for difficulty begins not with scrutinizing the difficulty but with scrutinizing God.

If you're standing between Migdol and the Red Sea, and armies are all around you, stop looking at the armies, stop looking at the sea, stop looking at yourself, and look to God. God will do what is right. God will do what is best. And whatever he does, it will be an opportunity for you to bless the Lord.

What significant trial is weighing you down? Is it a family member? A wayward child? Difficult circumstances with no foreseeable end in sight?

Bless the Lord! Praise God! Only as we focus on the blessedness of God can we bless him through the pain.

When I think of the blessedness of God I think of his goodness toward us, his sovereignty, his love, his grace, his glory. Peter, here, zeros in on God's mercy. Take a look at the next section:

According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead

2. Consider the Mercy of God

Mercy is something so common to Christian talk and Christian life that it's easy to take for granted. We really have a tame, domesticated view of mercy. A low view of mercy comes from a low view of our sin, and a low view of sin comes from a low view of God. But to understand what Peter's saying here, to feel the blunt force of his argument, we must come to grips with what mercy actually is.

D.A. Carson tells a story about when he was in Germany working on his studies. He had become friends with a man who was working on his doctorate in Germany while his wife was going through school back in London. As they got to know each other more, Carson learned that though his man was raised by Christians in a Bible-believing, church-attending home, he was living an immoral lifestyle. Carson questioned him, probing to see why he thought it was permissible.

The man's response was "*God is good. He's bound to forgive us. That's his job.*"

That's his job. Some of us have a similar view of God's mercy—he's bound to forgive us. He's obligated to have mercy on us. But if mercy is something God is *obligated* to do, it ceases to be mercy. Instead of mercy, it's due pay. But this is not what the Bible teaches.

If there is anything that God is *obligated* to do, it is justice. And for we rebels, justice is a scary thought. We have turned, we have sinned, we have fallen short of God's standards. The only thing God is obligated to do is see to it that our sin is paid for. He will not allow a single sin to go unpunished.

This is why the cross is so valuable. At the cross it was Jesus in my place. Jesus took on my guilt. Jesus bore my sins. Jesus suffered my punishment. Jesus was crushed for my rebellion. Jesus felt the full fury of the wrath of God—though I was the one who deserved it. “Bearing shame and scoffing rude, in my place, condemned he stood, sealed my pardon with his blood, hallelujah, what a Savior!”

Mercy was purchased for sinners by the blood of Christ. It was not obligatory for God to do such a thing. It was his free choice to bestow sovereign grace upon us. “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy” says the living God.

One who marvels at the mercy of God will not have time to marvel at their own difficulties.

TWO WAYS THIS MERCY IS MANIFESTED

Peter goes on to mention two ways this mercy is manifested. First, in God’s causing of the new birth: “he has caused us to be born again.”

The Bible is crystal clear that those who are born only once are born under the wrath of God; Ephesians 2:3 says that we were “by nature children of wrath.” In John 3 Jesus makes clear that a second birth must occur for one to be truly saved—a new birth. Jesus told Nicodemus he must be “born again.”

Here Peter picks up this theme, saying that God’s mercy has been poured out on his people in such a way that has “caused” them to be born again. In other words, God’s mercy isn’t merely a forgiving of sins, it’s a transforming of the individual. God’s mercy re-created you. “If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). You now have capacities—for love, for joy, for faithfulness, etc—that unregenerate individuals don’t have.

The second way this mercy shows itself is in giving us a “living hope.” Anyone who has not made Christ their savior may have hope, but it’s a dead hope. It’s a hope that will prove fruitless and powerless on the last day. Hope set on the resurrected living Christ is living, active, growing, vibrant hope.

Can you see why this would be so comforting for these struggling Christians? Here they are facing difficulty we can hardly fathom. Peter tells them that God’s been merciful to them. What? How? God has made them born again. Okay, so what? That means you now have a living hope—a hope as secure, as powerful, as game-changing as the resurrection itself.

No struggle, no situation, no pain, no problem—nothing is so horrible that it can take away our living hope. God caused our new birth and God gave us living hope.

Hopelessness grows in the desert where the rains of God’s mercy are forgotten.

3. Consider your Future Inheritance

Peter continues with more fuel for hope-filled living. Yes, our God is blessed, and yes, he has lavished his mercy on us by giving us a new birth and flooding our lives with hope. Yes, we now can face any situation with hope. But he continues in verse four, speaking of our future inheritance.

“to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you”

The third consideration: your future inheritance.

The gospel is multi-faceted in its beauty. It not only promises forgiveness of past sins, and not only grace for present problems, but it also promises future blessings. Here, he speaks of an inheritance that will be given to all who are in Christ.

Peter’s audience may have been starting to wonder if following Christ was worth it. Peter wanted to remind them that the main reward they’re seeking isn’t one to be found on earth, but rather in heaven. There are blessings of being saved now, and the blessings are a multitude. But the fullness of those blessings will not be experienced until we all head home to glory.

This fullness of blessing is called here an inheritance. It’s described as being “imperishable” meaning it will never disappear. It’s undefiled meaning it will not and cannot be stained by sin. It’s called unfading which means time doesn’t wear it out. It’s the opposite of wealth here—wealth that is disappears, wealth that is often used and abused by greed, wealth that fades in value with time.

You have an inheritance that is more solid and stable than Mount Everest. You have an inheritance that is more pure and clean than white snow. You have an inheritance that is more permanent than stone. And listen to how Peter describes it: it is “kept in heaven *for you*.” There’s a personal emphasis here. It’s tailor made *for you*.

Peter aims to lift the spirits of his suffering brothers and sisters by peeling back the skies and showing them heaven. “Hey, you’re looking at your circumstances. But look up here! God has an inheritance for you! All this will be rewarded! It’s going to be over soon, and look what comes next!”

When I was little my mom and dad, who are here this morning, always used to take us to 7-11 after church. They said that if we could remember one thing about the lesson we could get a slurpee. Now as a little guy with about the same attention span as a gnat, I had a hard time sitting through church and Sunday school. But the promise of a slurpee, which to me was about the most glorious thing I could imagine at that age, made everything more bearable!

Slurpees didn’t last very long. They’re small and they melt. But God has something for us when we’re done here. It won’t be small and it won’t melt. But it *is* meant to motivate us to look forward. It is meant to give us hope.

There is a kind of intensity, a kind of fearlessness, a kind of invincible forward motion that grows in people who have meditated deeply on their future inheritance.

They have caught a glimpse of heaven’s glories, they’re on the scent of its majesty. They live with one eye on heaven and the other on earth. They see everything in the light of eternity.

This focus on heaven’s inheritance will help the tired mother to press on in the face of exhaustion, when the kids are sick and she hasn’t been able to leave the house for days.

This focus on the eternal reward will help the un-loved, neglected wife to continually and faithfully love and serve her unbelieving husband, even when nothing has changed for years.

This vision of majestic glory will spur husbands to lay down their lives for their wives, to sacrifices, to serve, to love, to care for.

C.S. Lewis was dead on: *"If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next."*

It was heaven's glories that sent Adoniram Judson to Burma, future rewards that sent David Brainerd to the Indians, a secure inheritance that caused Robert Morrison to forsake his earthly security and head to China.

Have you been gripped with the idea of heaven? Have you thought it through? Does eternal reward motivate you? Does a secure inheritance drive you?

Peter reminds his readers of the heavenly inheritance because they need to remember that suffering doesn't mean our inheritance is being taken away, it means we're being prepared for it.

4. Consider God's Preserving Power

There is yet one more thing that Peter brings to our attention, and that is God's preserving power. He writes, after describing a glorious inheritance, "who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."

If Peter's readers were thinking, "Wow, that inheritance sounds great. But I just don't know if I can make it. This opposition is too rough. These circumstances are too difficult, I'm just not sure I'll be able to make it. I'm not sure I'll be able to keep my faith! How am I going to make it?"

I hope this encourages you. If you're in the buzz-saw right now and there's no end in sight, listen.

This section is somewhat staggering—it is saying that believers, those who are described as being born again in verse 3, are "by God's power being guarded through faith." Peter is assuring these believers—saying, "Hey God is here, there is hope, there is an inheritance, and God's power will guard your faith so you will not lose it. God is the power upholding your faith."

For a believer, sometimes the thing we're most worried about isn't the difficulty of the situation, it's "will I be able to honor my Savior through this? I don't know if I can!"

Sometimes our worry sounds something like this: "I don't know if I can make it. I'm not sure I can go on. I'm too tired. I'm in too much pain. I'm in too deep. I don't have what it takes. All my resources are spent." Peter's response is this, God will energize your faith so that it will never die, and through that faith he will provide sustaining power.

Peter says that they are "guarded." This is a good word. It's a military word. In a different passage of the Bible this word is used to speak of a garrison guarding a city. God is militantly opposed to anything

destroy his children's faith. He will not allow it. He guards it, protects it, nourishes it. Everything that God allows to happen to you is *not* for the purpose of destroying your faith but for the purpose of strengthening it.

If you are feeling hopeless, strength-less, faithless—remember this glorious promise! God's infinite power upholds and energizes your faith, and he has promised to never let it fade. In your discouragement, remember this truth. He's forming you, shaping you, helping you. He's not an angry father trying to thwart you. He's a loving father teaching you to hold his hand when it's dark outside. I've found this practical and helpful: "For every one look to self take ten looks to Christ."

I am weak, but he is strong, he is able, he is all-knowing, he is all-powerful, he is good, he has promised, he will succeed.

But I am scared. But he is comforting, he is trustworthy, he knows what he's doing, he's never let his children down, he cannot fail, he'll make sure I'm okay.

Too much introspection can lead to faithlessness if we begin to think that everything rests on us. It doesn't. Christ will uphold us, strengthen us, enable us, empower us, comfort us, console us, and love us. He will not allow us to fail. We are absolutely secure. There is no pit so deep but Christ is deeper still.

As the text says he will guard us "for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." Now we can attain salvation, but the fullest sense of it awaits us. And God is guarding us so that we will not miss out on it.

Conclusion

It's difficult, if not impossible, to prepare yourself for suffering when the suffering strikes. We must prepare beforehand. Indeed, we must always be preparing.

What kind of people would we be if we often—and especially in difficulty—considered the blessedness of God and rejoiced in him? If we considered often, in the darkest times, the great mercy of God in giving us hope? If we thought daily of heaven's delights, our future inheritance? If we had rock-solid faith in God's power to preserve us to the end?

Do you have time in your day for thinking about God? Is your time in Scripture hurried and shallow? Does your time with the Lord lead to exaltation and praise or is it simply something you check off the list?

Think hard about God until you can rejoice in him. Ponder his great mercies, meditate on the grace he has lavished upon you. Dwell often on the subject of heaven and eternity. As Richard Baxter once said, "Bend your soul to study eternity." Lastly, do not fret. Let God's preserving power give you confidence and assurance—such that enables you to laugh at the days to come; to say with Esther, "if I perish, I perish"; to say with Daniel, "Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us out of your hand O king, but if not be it known to you, o king, that we will not bow down."