

The Hope That is in You—The Letters of Peter

1 Peter has two uniting themes of hope and holiness as hallmarks of the reborn children of God. These themes of 1 Peter exhort us to live holy lives now because of the hope that is in us. Our hope is the desired expectancy of the return of Christ and our bodily resurrection unto eternal life with all its glorious rewards. Therefore we love one another, grow spiritually, submit to authority, defend the faith, serve the church, endure innocent suffering, exert a positive influence, and have joy even in the midst of adversity---all because of the hope that is in us.

Hope is the distinguishing feature of the Christian life. Hope is one of the three great virtues of the Christian's response to a fallen world. Hope marks the Christian's attitude toward the future, thus hope is in many ways equivalent to faith. The only difference is that faith involves trusting God now in the present, but hope is trusting God for the future. Hope expects and anticipates what God will do, and then causes the believer to live now based on the future promises of God.

The Body of the Letter

Peter was writing his first letter from Rome about 64 A.D. to a mixed group of Jews and Gentiles in Asia Minor. All the traditional church sources placed Peter in Rome about this time, and Peter alludes to Rome in 1 Peter 5:13. Peter called it Babylon, but everybody agrees that it was code for Rome. By 64 A.D. Nero was in power and was persecuting Christians, and church tradition tells us Nero had Peter crucified upside down not long after this, possibly in 66 A.D. Suffering is mentioned 20 times in this letter and future glory 10 times. Therefore the theme seems to be that Christians should persevere now though being persecuted because of their future hope of glory.

Innocent suffering was a revolutionary concept new to the world at that time. The idea that someone who was innocent would suffer without returning the insult or seeking revenge was foreign to the Greco/Roman world. Christ was the ultimate innocent sufferer, and Christians should feel a unity with Christ when they suffer innocently. The Jewish teaching at the time and still alive today in all religions was that adverse circumstances and suffering came because of specific sins, and was deserved. Nevertheless, in the New Testament God allows suffering for His purposes and our good. Suffering is seen as part of the Christians' conflict with the world, an identification with the suffering Christ, and a means of developing Christian virtue and endurance. Peter told his audience in 1 Peter 4:13, "to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation."

Most biblical authors have a view based on the end times, and Peter is no different. He expected the end of the world and the return of Christ imminently. He expected it, hoped for it, and he knew our destiny to be with Christ in glory. Therefore he told his audience

to live now based on what is coming. Our hope determines our behavior, so our view of the future should motivate us to live godly lives now.

There are three main sections in 1 Peter: 1:1-2:10 reveals the destiny of all believers, and assures of the realities of salvation so that they might be comforted and encouraged now. 2:11-4:19 teaches the practical demonstration of the believer's life as a good witness in the midst of sufferings, both in the relationships with the church and also the world. 5:1-14 gives the duties of the believers to feed the flock, submit to authority, and trust God in every difficult circumstance.

Greetings from Peter

The traditional greetings of a Greek letter can be found in 1 Peter 1:1-2. Peter introduces himself as the author by saying that he is an apostle of Jesus Christ. The Greek word for apostle means literally "a sent one" from God. He was given full authority by the person who sent him, in this case Jesus Christ. The title apostle was used in two different ways in the N.T. It could mean anyone that was sent out by the churches like Barnabas or Apollos or several others that are called apostles, but it also was used for a special office conveyed directly by Jesus Himself. The original eleven closest disciples of Jesus made known in the Gospel accounts (like Peter, James, and John, plus the new apostle chosen in Acts 1:23-26, Matthias) were chosen by Jesus, given their charge, and given revelation directly from God. Saul, later known as Paul, was added to that list. These men personally saw the resurrected Christ, and were given a mandate to represent Christ. Therefore Peter was saying that his letter to them was not just his opinion, but it was inspired by God and had all the authority of God behind it.

Peter referred to his audience as "those who reside as aliens" meaning that as Christians, this world is not their permanent home, heaven will be their permanent eternal residence. The areas listed in v.1, where they are scattered, all can be found in what was Asia Minor, but is modern day Turkey. In v.2, the circumstances in which they were living did not originate by chance. The purpose and providence of God was behind it. Their life is controlled by "the sanctifying work of the Spirit". To sanctify is to set apart for holy use to a life style that expresses their relationship with Christ. The Holy Spirit progressively works in our heart to renovate our character. To be "sprinkled with His blood" brings out the O.T. image of the priests sprinkling the blood of the sacrifices on the people when the covenant was made to be God's special people. We have experienced the cleansing from the blood of Christ, and are now in a special relationship with Him.

Peter's desired blessings upon them are two of the most desirable blessings known to man. Grace is the unmerited favor of God that all our sins are forgiven, our relationship with God has been restored, we have been bought with the precious blood of Jesus, but also God continues even now to fill us with His Spirit, and we look forward to our future promised blessing of an inheritance in heaven. Secondly, Peter desires that they experience true peace. This kind of peace can only come from God. In the world, peace is just an absence of conflict and is fleeting, but to have peace between God and man is true eternal peace.

A Proclamation of Good News

In verse 3, Peter gives them a declaration of good news which forms the basis for grace and peace being theirs in spite of all the difficulty they may encounter in the world. The blessing and glory here all go to God because of His saving action on their behalf. Praise and worship is centered on God, who He is, and what He has done. Peter is not talking about some generic god, but the God who sent His Son Jesus Christ to die for our sins and be resurrected from the dead. God has caused us to have new spiritual life in this new union with Christ. We have been born spiritually to a living hope which is that we will experience eternal life. As Christ has been raised, we also will be raised.

This hope continues to be expressed in v.4 as we look forward to “an inheritance which is imperishable”. Our hope is not like worldly hope that is wishing for selfish things that cannot be, but our hope is desired expectancy. We are fully assured of our future because the object of our faith is the God who alone is able to deliver, and cannot lie. Our inheritance is unearned, but it is ours by right of our union with Christ. It is imperishable as opposed to all the worldly things that are decaying and eventually disappear. We have not yet received our inheritance, but it is reserved in heaven beyond the reach of danger or change. Our inheritance cannot perish, defile, fade, or be stolen because it is kept in heaven. It is not a material, but a spiritual reality. Thus, because of what we have to look forward to, death holds no fear for us in Christ.

Even now we are “protected by the power of God received by faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” Believers are currently being protected by God. We are secure in our salvation, and God has guaranteed our future glorification “in the last time.” Our salvation from the penalty of sin is complete, but our future salvation from the presence of sin is not yet completed, although guaranteed.

The Paradoxical Feature of Christian Existence

Verses 6-9 shift us to the consolation and joy of believers in the face of suffering. Can we rejoice despite, or even because of suffering? Peter says yes, we can rejoice for a little while even if we are distressed by various trials. What good could come from these trials? Our faith will be tested and proven genuine. Peter uses the image of gold ore being refined by heating it to the point that all the impurities are separated so that you are left with pure gold. When Jesus comes back we will be honored and rewarded to have persevered. Now, we have not seen Him yet, but we prove our love for Him in these trials. We are able to rejoice now in a trial because of our strong belief that He is coming again. This joy is unknowable to the rest of the world. We live parallel lives simultaneously. We struggle in this material physical body with its aches and pains, but we live joyously in our spiritual life based on what Jesus has done for us, and will complete in the future. Our love and trust in Christ is not based on sight or feelings. Our trust and commitment is based on objective truth about what God, who is able to deliver, has promised. I believe there is a song that goes, “Our hope is based on nothing less than Jesus Christ, our righteousness.”

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