

Time of Grace Ministry
First Peter / First Things: Hope Keeps Me Going
March 14, 2010
I Peter 1:3-12

How much hope is in your heart today? Are you riding high? Or do I need to come and talk you in off the ledge? Everybody's looking for answers and hope. I want to help people find it in God. And his amazing grace.

You know, it occurred to me the other day that there really isn't anybody who has a life that's without any stress at all. St. Paul said once, "I've decided and I've learned how to be content in any and every situation, whether it be full of good things or when I've been in want. I've learned the secret of being content." And that kind of impressed on me that everybody has stress, even people who seem to have a lot of wealth. Now you might think, "Oh, I wish I had a big load of investments. I wish I had a lot of assets, I wish I had a lot of money." Well, have you ever talked to people with a high net worth? In the last couple of years, the poor economy and the blowing up of the real estate bubble has put a severe dent into the holdings of anybody who's got assets, accumulated assets. My kids are practically broke already so the bad economy has not taken much away from them. They had very little to give up. But it's very stressful to someone who's counting on a future income from investments that have now melted down thirty, forty, fifty percent.

Or you might think, "I have this crummy little house" or, "I'm only renting. If only I had a nice big house." Well, have you talked to anybody who's got a great, big house? It's a lot of work to keep up. It's very expensive to maintain, taxes – of course, nobody likes taxes – they all seem high and so having a great, big chunk of real estate to live in means you have that much more to maintain and make repairs on. So, it's not a guarantee that if you live in a big house your life is going to be stress free.

Or maybe you know people who say, "I'm so tired of being single and alone. I really wish I had a family, if only I had kids." Have you checked in with somebody who's got two, three, four kids lately? They bring their own stress. It's just a different kind of stress. You don't evade stress by letting go of your single life; you just trade it for a different kind of stress and pressure.

I don't read them aloud very often but I always read the mail. People who send me letters are of great fascination to me. I can't answer them all, but I do read every one that comes in. And people tell me stories about their life and there were two that really hit me and I'd like to ask your permission if I could read some excerpts from those letters because they're talking to me about the stress in their lives. Sometimes we have stress because God gives us so much, and sometimes we have stress because God takes things away. And here's a letter, no names, I won't tell you where, I'll just tell you it's from a man who lives in the eastern part of the country. And he writes, "My mother died of cancer in April of 2008. She wanted to die in her own bed, so I was her caregiver. She was a Christian who had played the church organ all my life and I lived with her and took care of her because it was just me and her, no other family. Now I'm alone. Two months later I was in a collision where a big truck ran into the back of my car at a stop sign.

I had a severe concussion, problems with my vision, speaking and spelling for months. Three months later, a water pipe burst in my home. The house was flooded. I had to move out of my home for three months. I lived in a cheap hotel where there were drug dealers in the parking lot and the fire alarm was going off all the time and the bed was as hard as a rock.” Now you think, “Oh, come on, with all this major stuff going on the guy’s worried about his bed?” Well, let me ask you this, if you’re really stressed out and you’re just exhausted and you don’t get a decent night’s sleep, that really makes everything worse, doesn’t it? Because in the morning you have to deal with a whole new day of stress and you’re exhausted from getting no sleep.

Here’s another one. “During this time, I developed sleep and anxiety and stress problems. My doctor put me on sleep meds. The sleep meds caused aggression and psychosis, so the anxiety meds calmed me down into a zombie state. One day I forgot to take the meds and a coworker got in my face and fussed at me and I lost my temper. My boss was tired of waiting for me to get better, so he had me fired from my job of five years. Three weeks ago, I had to put my pet dog to sleep. She was a sweet, gentle boxer. Two weeks ago, my father died from liver disease. Due to his lifelong alcoholism, his family called me and asked me to be there with him. We had spoken only mean things to each other during the last twenty years.” You know, I’ve got to tell you this. Maybe all that hardship in his life was actually what brought him closer to the Lord. And I can’t think of a better way to dig into this than to investigate one of the most powerful, hope-filled sections of God’s word that I know of in the whole Bible and I invite you to take out your Bible and look into I Peter Ch. 1 with me right now.

Some of you need this right now. You’re really in the middle of it right now. Maybe you’ve got some chronic health issues that are just dragging you down. Some of you live in so much pain that you have to take medications every day just to keep walking. Some of you struggle from such depression that you cannot function without your daily little helper. You don’t like it much, but you know that you’d go crazy without it. You cannot keep your mental equilibrium unless you are taking your antidepressants every day. Maybe some of you didn’t just get dented by the recession, but maybe the recession trashed your life. You had your job taken away from you. Or maybe a husband and a wife both lost their jobs. I know three different members of this congregation that have either gone through or are in the middle of foreclosure processes, losing their home. What could be worse than that?

Maybe some of you have personal betrayal problems and your family is breaking up. What could hurt worse than that? You think, “Take my home, but please don’t break up my family.” But even if you yourself are not in a crisis right now, you very likely will have a bomb that will drop on you in the future and you need to know what to do. And for sure, all of you know people who are really struggling right now and so you need to have some place in the Scripture to direct them to give them help in this miserable time. And so, I want to dig into I Peter with you right now and give you some words of comfort and encouragement for your soul so that you have some encouraging words to pass on to people you know who are struggling.

We’ll jump over the first paragraph, that’s just the introduction. Peter is writing to people he knew, his friends. They are in the northern and western areas of Asia Minor, today the country of Turkey. And St. Paul, on his missionary journeys, had gone through some of these regions himself. But it seems as though Peter’s own ministry led him to the northern and western parts

of Asia Minor. He was possibly as a long-term supervisor there and seems to be writing to people that he knows, people in the five provinces of the Roman Empire: Pontus; Galatia, that's in the middle; Capadocia, the wild mountain country in the north and east; Asia, the rich west coast; and Bithynia, the northwestern part which is like the frontier with Europe. "You've been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father."

Now when you struggle, here's what to do. Verse 3 tells you to start with "praising." And you might think, "That's about the last thing I want to do." It doesn't say, "Complain to God the Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ." It doesn't say, "Curse the name of God," like Job's wife wanted Job to do while he was scratching his sores and getting the bad news about what happened to his investments and his family and his animals. "Praise God." Yup! He says it without a trace of irony or without sarcasm. "Praise God." And here's why: "The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Why? Because, "In his great mercy," meaning, he's nice to people who don't deserve it. That's the sweet place to start. You don't have to try to justify yourself. You don't have to try to make yourself look pitiful and pathetic and beg. You're not begging. "In mercy" means that he's decided to like you and his goodness flows downhill, even though he knows that not only are you hurting, but you're also a sinner. "Mercy" is based on the forgiveness that Jesus brought and bought. "In his great mercy he has given," not sold, not traded, not awarded as a prize, "he has *given* you new birth." That's one of the metaphors, one of the word pictures, for conversion. Being born-again or regenerated all refer to the same thing, which is the process by which you turned from an unbeliever into a believer.

How did that happen? He gave it to you because of his mercy, because he likes you. He touched your heart and life through the power of God's word and the power of baptism and transformed you from being a heathen into being a saint. As you take inventory in your life, that's why you can praise him even with foreclosure papers in one hand. Even with a bad doctor's report in one hand. Even with your miserable investment report coming from your so-called savings that you so-called hoped to so-call retire on, you can praise God because you have forgiveness and mercy from a God who transformed you into being a saint of heaven instead of Prisoner No. 07543 with a toe tag on that will drag you into hell. "You've been given a new birth into a living hope." Not a dead hope, not a false hope, but a real, alive hope. You can take anything if you know that your future's going to get better. Just like when the Marine Sergeant is taking you through boot camp and Camp Lejeune, those long marches you go on and those hundreds of pushups are not going to define your life for you. And so God is going to transform your hardships to toughen you up and make you more useful.

What gives you living hope? It's the "Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." Jesus' resurrection proves to the world, proves to you and me and anybody you share it with that your worst enemies, your worst nightmares, have been defeated once and for all. The resurrection of Jesus proves that Satan himself has had his head crushed. The resurrection of Jesus proves that the grave for you and me is nothing more than a cot where we take a brief nap so our body gets a little rest in the earth and will be reborn. Just as he rose, Jesus' resurrection gives you the certainty of a resurrection, too. That's living hope. That means your future is so bright because you're going to bust out of your grave just as he did. He promises it to you. And the fact that he did it shows it can be done.

He also defeated the curse of sin over you. We all have that fear that we have really offended the Judge of all the earth but Jesus' resurrection means that the day of accountability that we're headed towards is not going to be a dreadful day of condemnation, but a happy reunion. All of this is guaranteed to us by Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Easter gives us our number one source of living hope. The resurrection of Jesus Christ guarantees an inheritance for us. To have an inheritance means that somebody died to be able to give it to you. Jesus not only died, but rose again to be able to give you the hope, the forgiveness and the immortality that you and I so desperately need. Inheritance is something that's for free. It comes to you not through things that you ever did. It was done by somebody who went before you. Any stuff like furniture, like a chest of drawers or a piano that you may have inherited from a loved one, was bought and paid for by that other person. So an inheritance comes to you for free. That's exactly what Jesus has done for you and for me. Another great thing about inheritance is that there's great memories attached to it. Scattered around our house I've got various kinds of stuff that I've inherited from some dear loved ones of mine who've passed away. And every time I see those things I kind of smile and I have a happy feeling inside because I remember the people from whom they came and I'm glad to be a good steward and keep it alive, keep it going, so we don't have to waste money buying new stuff. But it also gives me a thrill when I think of where it came from.

Now the inheritance that Jesus Christ has purchased for you and for me is one that cannot be assailed or taken away. St. Peter says, "Our inheritance from Jesus can never perish, spoil or fade because it's kept in heaven for you." That's a bank that will never have its assets eroded by inflation or by declines in the bond or stock markets. The financial markets that you and I put an awful lot of our trust in really have let us down in the last couple of years. I always keep thinking this is somebody else's fault, this is not my fault to see this happen. But if you had, let's say, \$100,000 in savings for your retirement two or three years ago, why you might have only \$50,000 left after what happened to the economy. Well, the Lord promises in his word that your heavenly inheritance, your place in heaven with him, the forgiveness of sins that you own as an inherited gift from Jesus, can never perish, spoil or fade. Satan himself can't take it from you. It can't get ripped off, hustled, stolen or taken from you. It's guaranteed in heaven for you and through faith you are shielded by the very power of God himself.

"In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials." There's nothing you and your friends and loved ones are going through that people at Peter's time didn't also have to go through. There is no new kind of suffering under the sun. A great strategy for dealing with stress, whether it's physical pain, whether it's declining health, whether it's seeing your assets' value evaporate, is to mentally imagine yourself later and pretend you're looking backwards and to see with some perspective what it is that you're going through and realize that you, in God's eyes, have already survived your disaster because that's how God looks at it. He's standing already in heaven describing the reality of you living with him forever, looking backwards and you saying, "Yeah, that was a tough time, but I made it. I survived because I had a living hope." It's like imagining yourself receiving a Marine award in full dress uniform looking back at your basic training and thinking, "Yeah, that was tough, that was hard, but the result is that I'm a Marine and I'm proud." That's what's going on here.

These trials that you suffered, “Have come so that your faith – which is of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.” In other words, it’s all about his agenda, not about yours. It’s all about what God is trying to accomplish in your life, not necessarily what you are trying to accomplish by making yourself big, making your reputation huge, making your name great, making your bank account swell, having a bigger and bigger house, wheeling around town in a better and better ride. God may give those to you or he may not. He may challenge you with managing lots of stuff or he may challenge you with the absence of stuff. He may challenge you with great, beautiful good looks and have to try to navigate through life when everything seems to come easy for you because people do favors for you because you’re pretty. Or he may challenge you with not being pretty. Both are burdens to have to carry.

And I’m not sure where you are at in this place, but when your time to struggle does come, know this – that what really matters is your faith, which is better than money. Truly, I say this without a trace of irony, faith is more valuable than gold. Gold melts at 1100 degrees Fahrenheit, very, very hot. God’s judgment at the end of the world is going to be much hotter, for it will not only melt all the gold in the world, it will vaporize it. Everything is going to be busted down, as the Scripture says in II Peter. “The elements will melt in the heat” in the fiery blaze that will burn up everything you can see.

So here’s my challenge to you today: What is your greatest treasure? Are these words true of you, as well? Could you say your faith is worth much more than gold? What do you value most in your life? Is it your money? Your house? Your good looks? Your physical strength? Your youth? Your business? Your income and job? Or can you truly say along with Peter, “My faith is of greater worth than all my gold.” I hope you can because all these other things can and will be taken from you, but nobody can take away the inheritance that’s waiting and guarded and guaranteed to you in heaven. That is yours simply through your faith in Jesus Christ. Through Jesus, you have become a spiritual billionaire. Through Jesus, you have a house waiting for you in heaven that the Bible calls a mansion. It’s part of the heavenly home of God himself and that’s waiting for you and guaranteed for you. Thanks to what Jesus bought for you as an inheritance, everything else that may be taken away from you is going to be given back to you and more. And in the meantime, the Lord, to build up your faith, may give you more things to manage and to use for him. See, everything that you have is a gift from God and even when the Lord takes things away from you, even then you can say, “Praise be the name of the Lord,” because it’s only to strengthen your faith, which is of greater worth than gold itself.

“Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and you are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.” That is, in our better moments. I complain as much as you, probably more, but in my better moments I sing Jesus’ praises even when I hurt. Even when I’m frustrated, even when I see things that I’d been working for melt away or disappear or dissolve, this is true in my heart. I do rejoice in my better moments and I want you to rejoice with me, even when it’s through clenched teeth of pain.

“You believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving” what tense is that verb? Present tense. “The goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” Your salvation is not only an event some day in the future, but the down payment has arrived

already now. Pay attention to the good things in your life and see God's fingerprints all over the place! The love of a friend, a family member who gives you kind words of encouragement, a teacher who cared enough about you to struggle with you and be patient with you when you were acting like a bonehead. Pay attention to God's acts of kindness and keep your eyes open as you go through life now.

One of the sad things about depression is it beats your eyes down to the ground. If you're looking at the ground all the time, you can't see God's treasures around you. Lift up your eyes even when there are tears in them. Lift up your eyes, stand up straight even when your back hurts and your knees are bad. Look around you and see what God is doing in you to encourage you to see you have a living hope connected to the resurrection of Jesus. Identify the blessings that you have and see that God is giving you boosts.

Trust him that there are good things and treats on your path on the road ahead of you. Your life is not a punishment for your many sins, you've been forgiven and you are loved. And God has already placed little chocolates on your pillow. They're not going to necessarily be life changers, they're not going to necessarily be million dollar bond packages or huge blocks of stock in some major corporation, but he's going to give you some encouragements and treats to sustain you and keep you going, because his goal for you is not to see this world as your paradise, but to survive it because you're in a war. But you have a living hope connected to Jesus that guarantees you a place with him forever. Through Jesus, you are immortal.

This is good news, isn't it? Then say, "Amen."

Final thoughts from Pastor Jeske:

I wonder if it's okay if I would pray for you today. A lot of people that I know struggle with things in their lives where they seem to be coming apart, where God is allowing things to be taken away from them. And maybe you're one of those people and could use a little spiritual boost. So let's pray to the Lord.

Lord Jesus, I want to thank you today and give you praise even when my life is painful. I want to give you thanks today, right now, even when it seems as though my life has had things taken away from me. Even in my times of hardship, I know you're at work helping me and I want to give you praise. I would like to ask you to send your Holy Spirit in my heart so that I don't quit or give up or despair, that I don't worry or see in my setbacks the conclusion that you have stopped loving me or aren't there to help me. Help me to believe that my faith in you is worth more than gold and that my inheritance is solid with you in heaven forever.

Lord Jesus, I pray in your holy name, Amen.

For Time of Grace, I'm Pastor Mark Jeske reminding you every day is a day of grace for you.

Journey into GOD'S GRACE

Guides for Personal Bible Study with Pastor Mark Jeske



First Peter/First Things: Hope Keeps Me Going

SCRIPTURE VERSE

I Peter 1: 3-12 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 resurrections of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation...In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold...may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

POINTS TO PONDER

- Peter encourages us that we can praise God even in our struggles.
- Our troubles and pain are temporary, allowed by a loving God to make us strong and sure.
- Our true joy is not in things of this world which will not last, but in Jesus' resurrection which assures us that sin and Satan are defeated and our heavenly home awaits us.
- Jesus gives us living hope.

IN SUMMARY

It doesn't matter who you are, we all at various times have disappointment and pain. God doesn't want us to see this world as our paradise. We need to be strong and survive because we're in a war. But no matter what, we have hope, a living hope which is connected to Jesus, our living Savior. He guarantees us a place with him forever. This is what will last, not the things of this world that momentarily give us pleasure. During struggling times we remember that our faith is the only thing that matters and we look to what is to come. But until that time that Jesus takes you home, look for the blessings he gives you along the way, to give you encouragement.

FOR REFLECTION

Even when things are really bad, you can still find God's blessings if you take the time to look. What about that neighbor who shovels your driveway unasked since you had your surgery? What about the company bonus you weren't expecting that helped to pay for your car repairs? What about the devotion you stumbled upon that seemed to speak right to your heart at just the right moment? God is always there – watching, caring, helping. Look for him.