

Hope When Things Seem Hopeless

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June 13, 2021

1 Peter 1.1 – 2

Over the course of the past year there has been a great deal of civil unrest and numerous mass shootings in the USA. The thought we are immune to senseless and unprovoked acts of violence in Canada was dispelled a week ago when a 20-year-old intentionally killed 4 members of a Muslim family and injured the 9-year-old son of the couple. Over the past several weeks the revelations about the unmarked graves at the Kamloops Residential School once again shine a spotlight on the institutionalized child abuse in the residential schools and the generational impact upon the indigenous community. We also watch as our country and much of the world moves further and further away from Christian values and we wonder about the implications down the road. Most of us are tired of Covid-19 and all its restrictions and we long for a return to some form of normalcy. For many, Covid will leave a permanent mark; a loved one was taken from them by the virus, or their jobs or businesses have been significantly affected. For so many it is the isolation and persistent loneliness that threatens them; most long to be able to get together once again with family members and friends. Many are gripped by fear and anxiety, rather than hope and peace. God, however, not only desires, but has provided a way to experience hope and peace when we are overcome with what is happening. Since we all face trials and struggles in our lives at some time or another, it is important for us to know God's way. Pain and hurt transcend every culture and nation; they are pervasive. The details differ, but no one can totally escape hardship. Thus, as we navigate thorough life it is important to be reminded of **God's provisions for hope when things seem hopeless.**

Today I am beginning a series on the Book of **1 Peter**. We can relate to the practical topics addressed in the letter, particularly when we feel overwhelmed, and hope is elusive.

Peter, An Apostle of Jesus Christ

The letter begins by naming the author, "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:1a, ESV). Peter was one of the 12 apostles; the fact that he is named first in each of the listings found in the Gospels (Matt 10.2 Mark 3.16 Luke 6.12) suggests he was the leader of the 12. It was Peter's brother, Andrew, who brought Peter to meet Jesus (John 1.40-41). Jesus changed Peter's name from *Simon* (his original name) to *Peter* (Greek) or *Cephas* (Aramaic), which means *rock*. Peter and his brother Andrew were fishermen from the Galilean city of Capernaum, and when called by Jesus, they immediately left their fishing business to become followers of Jesus.

Peter certainly had plenty of personal experiences to draw upon when telling others about the ups and downs of life and how to recover from failure and possess victory during adversity. Sometimes Peter was particularly astute like when he responded to Jesus when He asked His disciples if they also wished to turn back from Him as many others were doing. Peter's reply, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life," (John 6:68, ESV). At the other extreme was his impetuousness assertion just hours before the crucifixion of Jesus that he would never deny the Lord, that he would never fall away. His assertion was in response to Jesus' prediction that all His disciples would fall away (Matt 26.31-33). Jesus replied to Peter, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." (Matthew 26:34, ESV). Undeterred, Peter

persisted, “Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!” (Matthew 26:35, ESV). It was only hours later that Jesus’ prediction became reality as Peter denied knowing Jesus, followed by the sound of a rooster crowing and Peter weeping over his denial of Jesus (Matthew 26:69-75).

Imagine Peter’s remorse as his actions fell so far short of his claim. Many people never recover from such a collapse; they cannot get past their failure, and they escape to the obscure margins of life from which they never emerge. Peter undoubtedly did some serious soul-searching as he processed the crucifixion of Jesus and his denials. He did not need to wait long though before he received some reassurance that the Lord had not given up on him or abandoned him.

Easter Sunday arrived, and the tomb was empty – Jesus Christ was risen! The two Marys, accompanied by Salome, were the first to make the discovery of the empty tomb where they were met by an angel waiting to fill them in on what had happened (Mark 16:1-6). Note the specific instruction the angel gave them, “But go, tell his disciples *and Peter* that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.” (Mark 16:7, ESV). He singled out Peter to reassure him that his failure was not final; God’s grace was sufficient to enable his recovery. Peter may have still entertained some lingering doubts about the future, but they were dispelled when, following Jesus’ resurrection, Jesus met him and several others who had spent the night fishing but without success. The disciples did not realize it was Jesus when He directed them to cast their net on the other side of the boat. However, their miraculous huge catch, 153 fish to be exact, opened their eyes to recognize it was the Lord (John 21:1-11). Peter was discomfited when he realized it was the Lord, his self-confidence was gone. But after breakfast, Jesus erased any doubt about Peter’s future as an apostle when He commissioned Peter to shepherd His sheep (John 21:12-19).

Sometimes we become impatient with the missteps of Jesus’ disciples, particularly when not only Peter denied the Lord in His darkest hour, but all of them, just as Jesus had predicted (Matt 26:31). But everything changed on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended upon them and filled and empowered them (Act 2:1-4). They became fearless as they were enabled with the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit. That enablement by God was essential as they would all face intense opposition and persecution in the coming days as they declared the Gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Peter described himself as “an apostle of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:1). There were three criteria to being a first century apostle: he must be personally called by the Lord, he had to have seen the resurrected Christ and could therefore bear testimony to the resurrection, and his role as an apostle had to be confirmed through signs, wonders, and miracles (2 Cor 12:12). It goes without saying that because of those three requirements the role of an *apostle*, as typified by the 12, ended with their deaths. It may be helpful to also realize that sometimes the title, *apostle*, was used more broadly to refer to those who were foundational in the establishment of Churches.

Peter would go on and be the leader of the 12. He took the lead in identifying the replacement of Judas (Act 1:15-26). On the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit indwelt the believers, it was Peter who explained what happened and exhorted his listeners to repent of their sins and place their faith and trust in Jesus Christ for their salvation, to which 3,000 responded (2:1-41). Soon afterwards, Peter miraculously healed a lame beggar (3:1-10). The proclamation of the Gospel by the apostles and thousands of people turning to Jesus Christ for salvation did not escape the notice of the religious leaders who had Peter and John arrested. When called before the council, Peter fearlessly proclaimed the Gospel to them (3:1-12). He became familiar with making a

defense for his faith to his opponents. He also was at the forefront of protecting the integrity of the fledgling Church; he presided over the fateful demise of Ananias and Sapphira because of their deception (5.1-11). Later, as the Gospel spread to the regions beyond, practical questions arose about beliefs and practices; Peter took the lead in answering those questions at the first Church Conference, which convened in Jerusalem (15.1-35).

The continued growth of the Church was met by considerable resistance among the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. It was not long after Peter's first arrest that he along with other apostles were again imprisoned. However, the advance of the Gospel could not be stopped; during the night an angel of the Lord let them out and Peter and the others returned to the temple to teach the words of life (5.17-26). As the Church dramatically grew in Jerusalem, the opposition to the followers of Jesus escalated as well. Stephen was arrested and after the Jewish leaders produced false witnesses against Stephen, they succeeded in having Stephen stoned who became the Church's first martyr (6.8-7.60).

The opposition to the followers of Jesus intensified as the religious leaders launched an aggressive assault on the Church spearheaded by Saul (8.1-3). However, Saul would be confronted on the road to Damascus where he was gloriously saved and renamed Paul (9.1-19). Not only did the Jews continue their attack on the Church, but Herod the king joined in by killing James the brother of John (12.1-2). Herod was further emboldened when the Jews applauded his murder of James and he arrested Peter also (12.3). Despite guarding Peter with 4 squads of soldiers, they were no match for the prayers of the saints and the angel of the Lord who freed Peter from the chains which bound him and led him out of prison (12.4-17). It of course, did not fare so well for the soldiers who were responsible to guard Peter – Herod had them all put to death. The intensifying persecution of the Church in Jerusalem resulted in the saints scattering beyond Jerusalem and they took the Gospel to the regions beyond, including to the region where Peter wrote his letter.

Peter certainly knew firsthand what it was to live for Christ during opposition and persecution. He knew what is meant to proclaim the Gospel of salvation among those who despised him and plotted violence against him. He certainly knew what the inside of a prison looked like. He was no stranger to suffering for the cause of Christ. He also knew about the enablement of God and provision of grace to weather those storms and live victoriously. Despite how dire the situation already was, Peter could also see gathering storm clouds indicating worsening trials.

Peter wrote his letter from "*Babylon*" (1 Peter 5.13); however, it was not likely *Babylon* in Mesopotamia that he referred to, but rather a fitting pseudonym for *Rome* which mirrored the evil of *Babylon*. He used a *code word* to obscure his actual location to protect believers from persecution. While Peter is the author of the letter under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he likely dictated it to Silvanus, (5.12), also known as Silas, who would have ensured the grammar and word structure was correct. Silvanus delivered the letter to the recipients.

It is important to place the Scriptures in their historical context to better understand and apply the Scriptures. That is certainly the case with Peter's letter.

The Context

Nero was the emperor of the Roman Empire while these events were unfolding in Jerusalem. He was a diabolical and cruel leader who knew no restraint on his violence and debauchery. He had his mother murdered, several of his wives, one of his brothers, former supporters, and anyone

who stood in his way or displeased him. He had a particular hatred for Christians and delighted in his cruelty against them. That hatred was fueled by their worship of God alone and their refusal to pay homage to him as a god, something he craved. He indiscriminately and mercilessly crucified Christians and as a part of gladiator matches, he fed Christians to lions. His reign of terror against Christians knew no bounds.

The *Great Fire of Rome* in July AD 64, which was also the year it is commonly believed Peter wrote his first letter, broadened the persecution of Christians. It was widely believed that Nero was responsible for the fire which destroyed two-thirds of Rome, caused the deaths of hundreds, and left thousands homeless and all their possessions gone. The fire also upset their religious practice and culture since it destroyed temples and centers for worship of their pagan gods, as well as the idols people had in their homes. By inference, it was obvious the pagan gods of Rome were unable to protect them from this disaster. Understandably, there was a great deal of resentment and anger among the people. Nero saw it as an opportunity to deflect the blame for the fire to the Christians who had predicted a fire would destroy Rome because of her unbelief and wickedness. Despite there being no evidence to support the involvement by the Christians in the fire, Nero made them the scapegoat for it and persecution of them became more intense and widespread and gradually spread throughout the Roman empire. Hence, the situation was worsening for Christians throughout the Roman empire. That was the climate in which Peter wrote to the relatively new Christian believers.

The Initial Recipients of the Letter

Having described himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ, Peter identified his readers, “To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia” (1 Peter 1:1, ESV). Those names were all locations in Asia Minor, or modern-day Turkey and they are listed in the order one would expect a messenger to deliver a letter to them. You may recognize that people from three of them, *Cappadocia*, *Pontus*, and *Asia*, were present on the *Day of Pentecost* in Jerusalem (Acts 2.9), hence some of them may have been among the believers in those cities. As well, people fled to those cities to escape the escalating persecution elsewhere, thus the term, exiles, or aliens, and the reference, *of the dispersion*, or *scattered throughout* (NIV), i.e., they were not originally from there.

Unfortunately, persecution reached those centers as well, and it was likely going to get worse. Given the content of the letter, it is likely most of the first recipients were Gentiles, with perhaps a small number of Jewish believers among them. Due to the persecution they were facing for their faith, some of them were reconsidering their commitment to Jesus. The Jews may have thought about returning to the familiarity and greater safety of their synagogues. The Gentiles were tempted to return to the idol temples and worship the emperor rather than face the scorn of their countrymen. Some of them may have been confused and felt forgotten; they were looking for answers to their doubts and reassurance in their faith. Imagine their excitement when they received this letter. It would be like us sitting by the phone waiting for it to ring with news, or checking our e-mail every few minutes; except for them they received very little news, certainly not many letters from one of the apostles, hence when Silvanus (Silas) arrived with a personal letter from Peter it was a big deal; they would have poured over it searching for words of encouragement and direction. It provided hope to them to continue and stand steadfast.

They were surely encouraged by Peter’s description of them as “those who are elect . . . according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for

obedience to Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:1a,2a, ESV). They were among God's *elect*, sovereignly chosen by Him; they were His special people – among the “*called out ones*.” People are sometimes derailed when they read about God's *elect people*. Lengthy discussions ensue about who the *elect* are and how does that fit together with *free will*. In our pursuit of a complete understanding of *election* and *free will*, we must remind ourselves that we are addressing a topic that unfolds from an infinite God and is not fully comprehensible by our finite minds. It is good to also remind ourselves that our mandate is not to determine who the *elect* are but to share the Good News of salvation to all who will listen. Those who choose to believe the Gospel and trust in Jesus Christ for their salvation and walk with Him reveal they are among the *elect*. God's invitation to salvation is universal, “Whoever will, may come!” Consider, some familiar verses that make it abundantly clear that the opportunity for salvation extends to all and is dependent on a person's response to the Gospel: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16, ESV). “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.” (5:24). “Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.’” (6:35). In Peter's second letter we are reminded “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9, ESV). God desires everyone would accept Jesus Christ, His provision for their salvation. It is also comforting to remind ourselves that salvation is not dependent on understanding everything, it is dependent on people trusting in Jesus Christ for their salvation; God asks people to trust Him and His Word.

In the midst of the turmoil and rejection faced by the initial recipients of Peter's letter it had to be reassuring to be told that they were among the *elect* of God. They had been saved by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit and were saved for a purpose, that they might be obedient to Jesus Christ. Having their eyes opened and having been indwelt by the Spirit of the living God, they were now able to be obedient to the One that counted most – Jesus Christ.

Recipients of Grace and Peace

Peter extended *grace* and *peace* to them; *grace* and *peace* are interlocked. *Grace* is simply God's unmerited favor – it gives people what they don't deserve. It is freely given by God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 1.7). *Grace* is essential to our salvation – apart from it no one would be saved. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:23–24, ESV). “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8, ESV). Having been saved, we have unfettered access to the Father through His Son Jesus Christ. “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16, ESV). It is from God's inexhaustible supply of grace that we are bestowed with sufficient grace to victoriously cope with the trials of life. Paul prayed to the Lord to remove *a thorn in the flesh* from him, but instead of removing it, God provided him with additional grace to live with it. “But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (2 Corinthians 12:9, ESV). Grace is not only essential to salvation, but it is also essential to living obediently in a God-honoring manner.

The only way the believers in *Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia*, would be able to victoriously deal with the rejection, hatred, opposition, hardship, and persecution they were facing, was by *grace*. It is true that many who were not followers of Jesus Christ also faced opposition and hardship, but what was unique among believers was their response. It requires supernatural intervention to live triumphantly when persecuted – to have *hope*. Apart from drawing upon the grace of God, bitterness, hatred, anger, and vindictiveness take over.

Peace is the result of *grace*. It is first needed in relationship with God. Before being born-again a person is at enmity with God, an unbreachable chasm separates them. But Jesus Christ bridges that gap caused by sin by having paid the price for sin at Calvary. All who place their faith and trust in Jesus for their salvation gain peace with God. It is from that beachhead that peace precipitates upon God's children. It is particularly evident when people face turmoil and adversity – it is then during times which are anything but peaceful that God envelopes His children with His peace. "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7, ESV). Over the years innumerable people have told me about experiencing *the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding*, and how it guarded their hearts and minds and enabled them to get through what in some cases were horrific situations. Sometimes, as we think about some of the scenarios that people have gone through, we conclude we would never be able to go through them, we certainly wouldn't have peace. We need to remember that the only way those who got through those trying times and who experienced peace, was because of God's provision of His grace for them. And the comforting fact is, that if we were called to go through the same trials, God would provide us with sufficient grace too – God knows we don't have what it takes – it is supernaturally provided by Him. The provision of God's grace from His inexhaustible supply is provided *just in time*. He dispenses His grace to us when we need it.

Peter, as Paul, highlighted at the outset of his letter, the necessity of grace to possessing peace.

Themes in Peter's Letter

Peter wrote his letter to encourage those who read it to not give up, to not grow discouraged, to not lose hope, but to press on even during adversity, suffering, hostility, and hardship. However, he was not asking them to do so with the proverbial stiff upper lip or with clenched teeth, rather to do so with a sense of peace in their hearts. Central to facing adversity victoriously is knowing who we are and where we are headed. Peter spends time on reminding us of that at the outset. Not only did people living under Nero's unrelenting assault need to understand that, but so do we. We need reminders not just about who we are, but the hope that is ours in Jesus Christ. We can be overwhelmed by our immediate concern to cope with the present – the dangers and difficulties we are facing face right now, just like those first century believers. But a key element in achieving victory in the present is the security that is guaranteed for all of God's children for the future. We have a future that transcends all of life. Not only can we experience hope when things seem hopeless, but it is important to do so without becoming bitter and filled with pent-up anger.

Peter not only addressed the topic of suffering, but also answered other practical questions for his readers. One of those topics and one that believers have faced throughout the past year is, "What should our attitude be to a secular government, and should we obey them?" What kind of behaviour is appropriate for followers of Jesus? Should it differ from the world around us, and if so how, and why?

Essential to living victoriously is building our lives on the foundation of truth. Peter outlines central components of that truth. My prayer is that you will be enriched by the truths we focus on in this encouraging letter of hope.

May you be blessed and encouraged by the following song:

Christ Our Hope in Life and Death - Keith & Kristyn Getty, Matt Papa

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oibli1rz7mw&ab_channel=KeithandKristynGettyKeithandKristynGettyOfficialArtistChannel