

Hope, something to hold onto!

1 Peter 1:1-9

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Have you ever felt overwhelmed by the circumstances of life? The loss of someone you don't think you can live without; or the loss of a job by unfair or unjust decisions; or even the loss of home or country or health. Life crashes in, and when it does you feel overwhelmed. You need something to hold onto.

The Apostle Peter addresses a group of believers who were in just such circumstances. They were suffering persecution for their faith in Jesus, and many had lost all, and things would get worse before getting better. As an outlawed group of the first century, they had become a scattered people —leaving homes, sometimes family, work, and anything resembling security.

"Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance" (1 Peter 1:1-2).

The one writing this to encourage the saints was a pillar in the church: Peter. Solid as a rock; that's Peter. But he hadn't always been so solid. At times he had been like shifting sand. Noted for his rash and bold statements, Peter had at various times...

- asked Jesus to let him come onto the water,
- offered to build three tabernacles (until interrupted by God),
- told Jesus not to wash his feet,
- told Jesus he would not let him die,
- told a group around a fire that he didn't know Jesus (three times!).

In other words, Peter had some OOPS moments, but Jesus met with him several times after the resurrection, including a moment at the Sea of Galilee where he re-commissioned him three times (once for each of his denials of Jesus).

This one who had been given hope by Jesus, now sets in writing the basis for all hope as the Holy Spirit guides him. Here's his deep and powerful description of real hope:

"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 resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In all 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 the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls." (1 Peter 1:3-9)

How does he make the jump from persecution to praise? It's all because of the living **hope** we share in Jesus. He describes it in a powerful way by looking to something in the past, something in the future, and something right now.

First, Peter reminds them of a past event in history. Our living hope is based on the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. He really did die. He really was buried. And he really was resurrected from the grave by the power of God. Our living hope is based on the powerful resurrection of Jesus.

Second, he points them to a future moment: the inheritance we have in heaven. It's mind-boggling to think of the wonder of heaven that is waiting for us. We are heirs with Christ in something so marvelous that Peter struggles to describe it. He uses a series of negatives. In the NIV it's ***"an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade."*** Did you get that? It will never perish. It will never spoil. It will never fade. I still like the way the old King James Version translates this: ***"an inheritance that is incorruptible, undefiled, and fadeth not away."*** The finest things in life on earth are things that can be destroyed or taken away or diminished in value. All of it is fleeting. Heaven is not! It will never perish, spoil or fade. This is the future glance of the living hope.

Finally, what about now? It's great that there was a resurrection in the past. And great that heaven is ahead. But what about the present overwhelming circumstances? He says that we ***"are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."*** There is something of that same power of God that is present with us in the current moment. Knowing that we will get past a challenge and make it to something better anchors our souls.

Tom Schaefer, a friend of mine, was a Colonel in the United States Air Force. He was a prisoner of war for 400 days in Iran. Some days he didn't know how he would survive. It was his faith in God and thoughts of going home that kept him alive and sane. He would imagine getting off the airplane, his grandchildren running to meet him, and getting on his knees (in his mind) he would tell them, "You can be proud of Grandpa. Grandpa did good."

He kept a journal (not with pencil and paper). They would not have allowed that, but he kept a secret journal in his Bible by punching holes in the letters and numbers on the pages. Each day after punching in the message, he rubbed the page flat so that his captors would not discover it. He could hold it up to the light and read his journal. To simplify the process he came up with a code. And for it to be a "good day," he decided he needed only three things:

1. A book to read.
2. A warm place.
3. A bite of food.

He showed me that old journal-Bible and commented, "You'd be surprised how many good days I had –even in solitary confinement."

And, yes, the moment did come when he disembarked the airplane. He finally did get to hug his grandchildren and tell them they could be proud of their Grandpa. Looking forward to that moment had given him hope. Likewise, our looking forward to heaven, anchored to the resurrection of Jesus, gives us something to hold onto.