

A Living Hope

1 Peter 1:1–9

June 5, 2024

Pastor Trent Eastman — New Baptist Church, Huntington, West Virginia

Why This Letter, Why This Night

Those of you who have been with us on Wednesday evenings know that we have been spending considerable time in the book of Acts. Peter stands at the center of so much of that narrative — preaching in Jerusalem, healing at the gate of the temple, standing before the Sanhedrin, receiving the vision at Joppa, opening the door of the gospel to Cornelius and his household. He is everywhere in the first half of Acts, and the more time I spend with him there, the more I want to understand him. So I want to spend some time in his letters, because there is a remarkable correspondence between what Peter preaches in Acts and what he writes in these epistles. The same theological convictions, the same pastoral urgency, the same accent on suffering and hope and the life of the Spirit — it all runs through.

One connection in particular caught my attention as I was preparing for tonight, and I want to lay it before you. In Acts 5, after the apostles have been flogged by the Sanhedrin and ordered to stop speaking in the name of Jesus, an angel appears to them in prison and issues this command:

“Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.”
(Acts 5:20)

The Greek there is striking: $\tau \eta \mu \alpha \tau \alpha \tau \varsigma \zeta \omega \varsigma \tau \alpha \upsilon \tau \eta \varsigma$ — “the words of this Life.” And then you come to 1 Peter 1:3, and Peter writes that God “has caused us to be born again to a living hope” — $\epsilon \varsigma \lambda \pi \iota \delta \alpha \zeta \sigma \alpha \nu$. A living hope. There is a thread running between those two texts that I believe is worth pulling on. The life that Peter was commanded to proclaim in Acts is the same life into which Peter tells us we have been born again here. The gospel is not merely information about a historical event. It is an announcement about *Life* — living, present, and active.

That is the territory we are entering tonight.

The Problem with the World's Hopes

Let me begin with a question that I suspect you have not been asked lately: Do you still have dreams?

There is something about that question that tends to produce a rueful smile in people of a certain age. When we are children, dreams come effortlessly. Ask a child what they want to be when they grow up and the answer will come without hesitation — and without any apparent concern for the laws of physics, the job market, or the limits of human talent. Children live inside their hopes. Their dreams are a window into their souls, and one of the genuine joys of parenting is leaning over that windowsill and looking in.

But something happens as we grow. Life becomes, by necessity, more practical. We make commitments — marriages, careers, mortgages, children — and each one, however good and right, trims away a little more of the extravagant dreaming of childhood. Ellen Sturgis Hooper said it with painful precision: *“I slept, and dreamed that life was Beauty; I woke, and found that life was Duty.”*

And yet, for all of that, the best lives — the most productive, the most generative, the most fully human lives — seem to be those that are still shaped by some animating hope. West Point has a motto worth considering: *“Risk more than others think is safe. Care more than others think is wise. Dream more than others think is practical. Expect more than others think is possible.”* That is a description of a life fueled by hope. The great athlete trains for years with a single vision in mind. The inventor endures ridicule because he can see what does not yet exist. C. S. Lewis, writing about something far deeper than career ambitions, observed that hope has a strange way of reaching backwards as well as forward.

But here is the honest problem with the hopes of this world. Even when they come true, they do not hold. Money, power, beauty, accomplishment, recognition — every one of them fades. The writer of Ecclesiastes shakes his fist at this very fact. *Vanity of vanities*, he says. Everything passes. Everything perishes. The hopes we invest in the things of this world will, without exception, disappoint us — not necessarily because they fail to arrive, but because even when they do, they cannot sustain the weight of what our souls are actually longing for.

That is not pessimism. That is simply an honest reading of human experience. And it raises a serious question: if every hope we place in this world eventually exhausts itself, is there any hope worth having?

Peter says yes.

Born Again to a Living Hope

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, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Peter 1:3–5)

Notice the phrase Peter reaches for: *a living hope*. Not a static hope. Not a sentimental hope. Not a wishful hope. A *living* hope — one that is alive, that grows, that does not decay, that cannot be taken from you. And notice what grounds it: not human willpower, not the strength of our resolve, not the quality of our circumstances. It is grounded in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The hope Peter describes is only as secure as the empty tomb — which is to say, it is perfectly secure.

What does this hope consist of? Peter names it with three words of remarkable density. Our inheritance is *imperishable* — it cannot decay. It is *undefiled* — it cannot be corrupted. It is *unfading* — it cannot diminish. Set that against everything the world offers and the contrast is total. Gold perishes, though it is refined by fire. Fame perishes. Health perishes. Even the most beautiful things in this world carry within them the seed of their own dissolution. But this inheritance is being *kept in heaven for you* — held in the one place where nothing corrupts, nothing thieves, nothing fades.

And notice the movement across time in these verses. Peter is not speaking only about the future. He is describing something that reshapes the whole of a person's life — past, present, and future simultaneously. *We have been* born again. *We are being* guarded by God's power through faith. *We will receive* a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. This is not merely a destination we are moving toward. It is a reality we have been born into.

C. S. Lewis, in *The Great Divorce*, captures something of this when he has one of the heavenly teachers explain to the narrator:

“Not only this valley but all their earthly past will have been Heaven to those who are saved. Not only the twilight in that town, but all their life on Earth too, will then be seen by the damned to have been Hell. That is what mortals misunderstand. They say of some temporal suffering, ‘No future bliss can make up for it,’ not knowing that Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory... And that is why, at the end of all things, when the sun rises here and the twilight turns to blackness down there, the Blessed will say ‘We have never lived anywhere except in Heaven,’ and the Lost, ‘We were always in Hell.’ And both will speak truly.”

That is what it means to be born again to a living hope. It is not merely that something good is waiting for us at the end. It is that this hope reaches backwards and forwards, transforming the whole of life. Hope is living into eternity now.

What Are We Actually Saved From?

Before we press further into how this hope changes us, it is worth pausing on what this salvation actually consists of. Peter uses the word three times in this passage, and it is easy to move past it as though we all share the same definition. Let me be precise.

Salvation means being saved from the *penalty* of sin — from death and judgment, from an eternity separated from God. That is the ground floor of the gospel, and it is not a small thing. The penalty that our sin deserves is real, and Christ has borne it fully.

But salvation is also being saved from the *power* of sin. Sin no longer has the right to reign in you. The habits of the body, the patterns of selfishness and fear and bitterness, no longer have final authority over who you are. Because of grace, because of forgiveness, you can actually live a different kind of life. That is not a moralistic addendum to the gospel. It is the gospel working its way outward.

And salvation is being saved from the *presence* of sin entirely — a hope still ahead of us, but genuinely ahead of us. The day is coming when temptation itself will be absent, when the battle that now exhausts us will be over, when we will be what God always intended us to be: fully free, fully alive, fully complete.

And all of this salvation is *to* something as well as *from* something. It is salvation into the presence of Christ. That is the inheritance. That is the thing that is imperishable and undefiled and unfading. The fullness of joy is in his presence, and that fullness is what we have been born again toward.

How Hope Produces Joy — Even Now

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith — more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire — may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 1:6–7)

In this — that is, in this living hope — *you rejoice*. The rejoicing Peter speaks of here is not a mood. It is not contingent on circumstances being favorable. It is a settled orientation toward life that flows from a settled confidence in what God has done and what God will do. In the original language, the word carries the sense of a shout of gladness, a bright and glad spirit. But its roots go deeper than emotion. This is a life that has learned where its joy comes from.

Peter is writing to people who are suffering. They are exiles — scattered, dislocated, living as strangers in regions far from home. He is not offering them a greeting-card comfort. He is telling them that the trials they are enduring have a purpose: the testing of their faith, which is more precious than gold. And it is worth asking why faith is more precious than gold.

Gold perishes — it is only valuable in this world. Faith is an eternal value. Gold refines itself in fire, but it does not grow; it simply becomes more purely what it already was. Faith, tested by fire, actually *transforms* the person who holds it. Faith gives resilience that gold cannot give. Faith provides a joy and peace that no amount of wealth can replicate. And faith — this is perhaps the deepest thing Peter could say — is *pleasing to God*. Gold does not please God. The trusting heart of one of his children does.

I have seen this. When I returned from time in East Africa, one of the things that struck me hardest was the sheer depth of joy I encountered in people who had almost nothing by any material standard. I remember a woman in Kenya — she had lost her husband, her children, and lived in a poverty that was severe even by the standards of her community. What little she earned by making charcoal or selling firewood, she wanted to give away, to feed others, to care for those around her. She was joyful with what Peter calls here an *inexpressible joy*. She said something I have carried with me ever since: “*Though I have nothing, I have everything, because Jesus is my Lord.*”

That is not an anomaly. That is a biblical principle made visible. Happiness in this world is not based on what we have. It is based on our hope in the Lord. The shock we feel when we encounter a poor person’s joy is, if we are honest, a measure of how little we actually believe that.

And yet here, in our own context — with far more material comfort than most of the world could imagine — there is so much unhappiness, anxiety, and joylessness, even among believers. I want to say something carefully here, and if it does not fit your situation, set it aside. I think a significant reason why so many Christians are robbed of joy is that the Christian life has quietly become, for them, more about duty than about hope. When hope fades from the center, we begin reaching for other things to fill us — family, entertainment, achievement, comfort — all of which can be genuinely good, but none of which can bear the weight of a soul’s longing. They all reside in the perishable world. They will fade. The only way to live with lasting joy in this world is to live a life that is shaped, at its core, by your hope in the Lord.

In this, Peter says, *you rejoice*.

The Shape of Faith

Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:8–9)

Peter does not define faith here. He describes it. And the description is worth sitting with.

You have not seen him — and yet *you love him*. You do not see him now — and yet *you believe*. And believing, you *rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory*. This is not the faith of someone straining to hold on to something uncertain. This is the faith of someone who has been born again to a reality that is, in some sense, more solid than anything they can see. The joy that results from this faith is beyond what words can contain — Peter himself reaches for the word *inexpressible*, as if to say: language is not adequate to describe what happens inside a person who truly lives in this hope.

And what is the outcome of this faith? The salvation of your souls. Past, present, future — all held together in a living hope.

Notice the arc of time one more time. We *have been* born again — that is done, accomplished, given. We *are being* filled with joy that is inexpressible — that is happening now, in the present, in the middle of trial and exile and impermanence. And we *will obtain* the salvation of our souls — the full inheritance, imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven.

This is what shapes a life. Not a duty, though obedience matters deeply. Not a set of principles, though they have their place. But a living hope — one that reaches backward and forward and inward and outward, transforming the whole of who you are.

The question worth carrying home tonight is simply this: Is your life actually being shaped by this hope? Not as a theological abstraction, but as the animating reality of every day you live — in the difficult days and the ordinary ones, in the exhausted weeks and the joyful ones? We have been born again to something that does not fade, does not perish, does not disappoint. The only poverty that finally matters is the poverty of a soul that has stopped believing it.