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Scripture Text: 1 Peter 1:1-9

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A Living Hope

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to 1 Peter 1:1-9. Today we begin, as the Lord continues to lead, a series of messages from the First Letter of Peter, written by the apostle who used the nickname Jesus gave him, “petros,” meaning “rock” (John 1:42; Matthew 16:18). Peter wrote perhaps from Rome in the early to mid sixties to believers who had been scattered throughout Asia Minor, perhaps because of Caesar’s edict to redistribute the population of the empire to new settlements that would expand his rule to new territories (Jobes, 19-41).

During Jesus’ earthly ministry, Peter was anything but reliable and solid in his discipleship, quick to speak but weak in his commitment. But following Jesus’ resurrection and personal appearance to and reinstatement of Peter (John 21:15-19) and after the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1ff), Peter became a true rock of faith and a powerful preacher of the Gospel and leader of the church. Now writing as “the apostle of hope” (from ESV introduction to 1 Peter), Simon Peter encourages followers of Jesus to stand firm in the face of opposition and persecution in a society frequently hostile to the message of Jesus Christ.

We are living in times that are unfriendly and even dangerous for believers, not only in lands where overt persecution of the church is taking place, but right here in this country, where our fellow believers are paying a dear price for following Jesus. I cannot think of a more important section of Scripture for us to study than this letter with the purpose of encouraging and instructing believers in how to live faithfully in a non-Christian culture. During an interlude in this series of sermons, you will have the opportunity to hear from a representative of Open Doors, an organization that supports believers in lands of persecution, and also from one of our missionaries, whose church is disciplining converts who are paying a price for their conversion to Christ from another world religion.

My prayer is that we will not only gain a greater understanding of how to pray for and support those facing overt persecution, even possible martyrdom, but that we also will be encouraged to live faithfully as followers of Jesus in this secular culture, which often regards our faith with suspicion and even hostility.

Our text for today is introductory, following the traditional form of salutation, greeting and summary introduction of the theme of the letter. I'll read the first 12 verses, and our focus will be on verses 1-9.

Read 1 Peter 1:1-12.

The word "hope" has a different meaning in the Scriptures than for the unbelieving world. Outside of biblical faith, hope is a concept that means little more than wishful thinking. We believers also use the word "hope" when we wish for a good turn of events. We hope the weather will be bright and sunny (very often wishful thinking in Belgium), and we hope our favorite team wins their next game. We may also hope for more important things, like a promotion at work, but this "hope" may also be mere wishful thinking and optimism.

Biblical hope is much more than optimism and wishful thinking. It's a conviction that God's promises will be fulfilled. It's faith in the future as well as the present, and involves trust in God and his word to us. Often biblical hope is even against all appearances to the contrary. "Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed," writes the apostle Paul (Romans 4:18), when facing the humanly impossible odds against the fulfillment of God's promise of a son.

The "apostle of hope" Simon Peter writes to disciples scattered throughout Asia Minor, facing difficult circumstances and in need of the hope that only their faith in Jesus could give them. The message of 1 Peter is vital to our age, which is greatly in need of hope. Jean-Paul Sartre expressed the hopelessness of existentialist philosophy in the mid 20th Century in his play *No Exit*. Sartre pictured hell as people confined eternally to a room, where they had to face one another, with nothing to see or share except their mutually sordid lives. A memorable line in the play was "Hell is other people," and the implication was "Hell begins when hope ends." As Edmund Clowney comments, Sartre understated the reality of hell, but did remind us "how desperately we need hope" (43f). Hope gives meaning to this mortal life and to eternity.

As an apostle and pastor, Peter was concerned to encourage believers who were in places and circumstances of difficulty to put their hope in God. Even in his traditional salutation and greeting, Peter gives words of hope, which will be his theme throughout the letter. He writes that our living hope...

Begins with God's past initiative

In his address and salutation (1-2), Peter reminds his readers that they are...

God's chosen people

Those of us who know God through faith in Christ realize that we didn't choose God. Rather, he chose us and took the initiative in our coming to faith in Christ. We were, in the words of the apostle Paul, dead in our transgressions and sins (Ephesians 2:1). When we look back over our lives, we realize that our experience with God's mercy and forgiveness was all of his doing and by his initiative. The Lord told Jeremiah that before he formed him in the womb he knew him and already set him apart for his service before he was born (Jeremiah 1:5). Paul says we were chosen in Christ before the creation of the world (Ephesians 1:4).

This is an encouraging word for those facing difficulties and feeling like helpless victims against worldly and evil forces. If Almighty God has eternally known us and chosen us for himself, certainly his eternal purpose for our lives will be fulfilled despite the circumstances. We've always been in the mind and heart of a loving God, who not only chose us but redeemed us by the shed blood of his Son Jesus.

Peter alludes to the eternal New Covenant when he refers to our being sprinkled by the blood of Jesus (2). We are chosen, and the covenant has been ratified and sealed by Jesus' sacrificial death, making us his children forever. These are comforting words, paraphrased by Peterson in *The Message*: "Not one is missing, not one forgotten. God the Father has his eye on each of you...."

This living hope is for God's chosen people, his Church, who in this world are...

Scattered strangers

Peter addresses God's people as "strangers in the world, scattered throughout" the remotest regions of Asia Minor (1). Many of these believers were living in these remote regions due to an edict from a godless emperor, and were probably being ill treated by their host regions as unwelcome intruders who were unaccustomed to the host culture and even considered a threat by the native population. The Dutch word for foreigner is "vreemdeling," meaning stranger, which is my classification here in Belgium, even with my residence permit. The root word "vreemd" means "strange," and especially at first, the local language and culture seems strange to us and we seem strange and alien to the locals.

As people of hope we are strangers and aliens in this world and are scattered to the places God has chosen for us. Many who call themselves Christians have a weak concept of hope as an expectation that the good life they enjoy here on earth will only get just a little bit better in heaven. Christians with weak hope are too much at home in this world, and their values, behavior and perspective on life are almost identical to that of pagan unbelievers. But true disciples of Jesus are aware that in this fallen world we are strangers and are temporary residents who have a “better country” toward which we are on pilgrimage (Hebrews 11:13-16).

You may think that you’re being here in Belgium is the decision of your spouse, parents or your employer. Others of you may be refugees or asylum seekers. I have on my desk a quote by Mother Teresa: “May you trust God that you are exactly where you are meant to be.”

Just as we are children of God by his initiative, so are we scattered to our present location by his initiative and we need to trust that he has us exactly where he wants us to be, where we can grow in hope, faith and love for him and others. Our sense of belonging is through our being, not at home with this world and its values, but in our being at home with Christ Jesus, who resides in our hearts and with whom we share a mutual alienation from this fallen world.

Speaking of the cost of following him, Jesus said, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (Luke 9:58). Although homeless, Jesus was exactly where the Father had placed him. We share his estrangement from the world, and he has scattered us to the places where he wants us to be his people of hope. And a living hope, having begun with God’s past initiative...

Continues with our present experience

Although hope begins by God’s initiative in choosing and in placing us in this world, it continues in the experiences of the present, as Peter expresses in verse 3, namely in our...

New birth

We often think of the new birth as a one-time experience we also refer to as our conversion experience, one that can be located and dated if we want assurance of our salvation. But rebirth is one of many metaphors for becoming a child of God, and Scriptures are clear that people come to faith in very different ways and that it’s not important to locate and date an initial experience. What is important for assurance of a saving relationship with Christ is our sincere declaration that Jesus is our Lord (1 Corinthians 12:3) and our willingness to examine ourselves (2 Corinthians 13:5) in order to make our calling and election sure (2 Peter 1:10).

Jesus introduced the concept of the new birth to the religious scholar Nicodemus, who needed to understand that legalistically adhering to religious rules would lead only to spiritual death. He needed to be born again, which means to be born of the Spirit (John 3:1-15). Peter praises the Triune God for our new birth, which began our new life in the kingdom, introducing us to our living hope, which is the heart of this passage. Bible scholar William Barclay says that there are few passages in the New Testament where more of the great fundamental Christian ideas come together than in verses 3-5 (Barclay, 201). Because of our new birth, which came about by the grace of God, working in us from the moment we first believed, repented of sin and began to follow Jesus, we are daily becoming new creations (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Because we are in Christ, we have access to every spiritual blessing in kingdom living (Ephesians 1:3). Through the new birth we have become people of faith and also of a living hope that God will fulfill every purpose for our lives, both now and for eternity. Although we live in this present fallen world of the old kingdom, we belong to the new kingdom and have begun already to live in the reality and by the power of the new age of the everlasting kingdom. Unlike the world's hope of wishful thinking, our hope in Christ and in the reality of the eternal kingdom grows stronger day by day. As people of a living hope and eternal perspective we also live by...

Faith under fire

Peter writes to followers of Jesus who are experiencing a "normal Christian life," which is not what we in the West have come to think is normal. Many of us were evangelized through a persuasive sales technique that promised that "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life" (Jobes, 4). Indeed, God does love us, but his plan includes placing our faith under fire in order to prove its veracity and quality, whether or not it's fitting us for eternal glory and is of use for God's present glory.

Peter alludes to bad things happening to God's people, things that bring grief, that try our faith to prove its value, just as gold is refined in fire, which burns out the dross (6f). Peter reminds us that we are shielded by God's power during times of difficulty, trials and the testing of our faith (5).

We speak of someone who's never experienced difficulty as having lived a sheltered life. Indeed, God doesn't allow his followers to live a sheltered life, but he shields our faith from harm. This is how I understand the Psalms that speak of God's promise of protection for his people from all harm, danger and death. Of course we know that God's people often experience even physical harm and violent death, and sometimes because of their faith and faithfulness to God. I believe the promise is true because God protects the faith of his people and our eternal life and destiny are secure and his purpose for our lives is fulfilled for his glory and honor. We are not sheltered, but we are shielded.

This message about faith under fire from the "apostle of hope" is treasured by those who are suffering for their faith and are experiencing God's sustaining grace. This is the reason that 1 Peter is said to have been the most popular

book in the 90's in the former Yugoslavia and in Muslim Indonesia (McKnight, 35). I have a notion that 1 Peter is a popular book to the believers who today are suffering for their faith in many other parts of the world.

We are sustained and encouraged when our faith is under fire because we realize we are following in the steps of our Savior, Jesus, who calls us to follow him in a cruciform life (Luke 9:23ff;14:25ff) and that our identity as his followers is a guarantee of our difficulty and suffering (John 15:18-16:4). As NT Wright says, following Jesus is costly: "You don't get to share God's life and escape without wounds" (Wright, 280).

But Malcolm Muggeridge shares from his life experience that the elimination of affliction from our lives would not only be unhelpful, but would be spiritually disastrous:

"Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my seventy-five years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence, has been through affliction and not through happiness, whether pursued or attained. In other words, if it ever were to be possible to eliminate affliction from our earthly existence by means of some drug or other medical mumbo jumbo...the result would not be to make life delectable, but to make it too banal and trivial to be endurable. This, of course, is what the Cross signifies. And it is the Cross, more than anything else, that has called me inexorably to Christ" (72).

But just as Jesus' suffering and death on the cross was followed by his resurrection and glorification, so we live in the hope of our resurrection and our sharing in his glory. Even as he faced the cross, Jesus knew the "joy set before him" (Hebrews 12:2). And we too can keep focused on our future joy, as Peter says in our text (8).

Like those in Peter's readership, we have the blessing of a living faith that allows us to love Jesus and be filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy even though we have not seen Jesus with our physical eyes (8). We have the blessing of a real faith that doesn't depend on physical sight, which Jesus told Thomas was to be a greater blessing than to have immediate, physical sight of the risen Jesus (John 20:29). Our faith and our hope grow stronger as we live in trust and obedience to and growing love for the unseen but present Christ.

Peter says that we have a living hope that...

Ends with our future inheritance

Our living hope is for a future inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade and that is being kept in heaven for us (4). Our inheritance is...

Safe and secure

This was an important and encouraging word to these believers scattered throughout Asia Minor. Many of them had in all likelihood been uprooted from their homeland, having to leave behind their property and, in leaving behind their homes, they also lost their family inheritance (Jobes, 85). But their true, lasting and invaluable inheritance was safely being kept for them in heaven. As John Calvin said, “The inheritance is said to be reserved in heaven so that we may know that it is beyond the reach of danger” (232).

We can sympathize with the hopelessness of many who in the recent economic crisis, lost all of their life's savings. For many of these people, their material savings represented all of their hopes and dreams for the future. Peter tells the faithful followers of Jesus that their really important inheritance is safe and secure and even amassing in significance, unlike the investments many of us have made in New York's Wall Street and other uncertain investments.

Likely many of these hearing Peter's letter read in the churches were followers of Jesus who had been disowned by their families upon their conversion to Christ, just as many today are being disowned by their Muslim, Hindu or Jewish parents and siblings. These believers found new family in the churches, and Peter assured them of their inheritance in Christ Jesus that would make any worldly wealth pale into insignificance.

Peter writes that we are to rejoice in our living hope which will end in our...

Final salvation

We are now people who live by faith and who have a living hope, but some day we will see Christ face to face and will receive our final and full salvation (1 John 3:2). No longer will we live by faith, but then will see Jesus face to face (1 Corinthians 13:12) and will live by sight, with spiritual insight and understanding that will accompany our glorification. All that we hope for now will then become our full possession. What we now have is a foretaste and a guarantee, but then we will receive all that's been promised (2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5; Ephesians 1:14).

The atheistic philosopher Sartre reasoned that hell begins when hope ends. But we say that heaven begins when hope ends, that is when hope is fulfilled and becomes sight. Hope ends not as disappointment but as glorious fulfillment. Life without hope in our final salvation is life that's without direction, purpose and lasting significance.

Our hope ends at its promised culmination—in the complete fulfillment of all that God has promised us. Peter says that this is the goal of our faith, the salvation of our souls (9). Our use of the word “salvation” is often a reference to an initial conversion experience, and we speak of salvation almost as a past experience that guarantees our future, regardless of the quality of our faith or our spiritual walk or moral conduct. Once we “get saved” it's as though all our

troubles are over and there's no need for growth or effort on our part. Such "salvation faith" is mere presumption.

We have been saved, but are also God's being saved people of faith, whose life of obedience and fruit bearing proves the verity of faith (James 2:14ff; Matthew 7:15-23). And we who are being saved will finally be saved when we enter the glorious presence of the Lord and our faith and hope become sight. The salvation of the soul (9) means the salvation of the entire person, body and spirit, the complete person and the person made absolutely complete in Christ, and not the salvation of just a "spiritual being." As NT Wright says, "We are saved not as souls but as wholes" (199). What God is doing now in our progressive salvation will be completed on the day of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:6).

Conclusion:

What a precious gift is our hope in Jesus Christ, a living hope that encourages, sustains and comforts us through all life's circumstances! His hope gives us an eternal perspective on this life and its momentary trials and present suffering (Romans 8:18; 2 Corinthians 4:17).

Our hope isn't wishful thinking, or the efforts we make to be positive thinkers against the reality of life. Our hope is, in the words of the writer of Hebrews, "an anchor for the soul, firm and secure" (6:19). This living hope that Jesus gives never disappoints, even though it carries us, not on a bed of roses, but through some heavy trials and a life of sharing in the sufferings of Jesus. But the living hope assures us that after the life of bearing a cross with Jesus we will be raised and glorified with him.

Today can be the beginning of a living hope for you, whatever your past sins and mistakes or your present condition. Hope for your future begins immediately with your faith in and commitment to the Lord Jesus. It's our prayer that all of you who are without hope will turn from self, sin and hopelessness and trust and follow him as the Christ of all hope, a living hope.

Some of you here today are desperately to hopes for a better job, for reconciliation with your spouse, better health or for some stability in your life. If you trust Jesus Christ you will be born anew as a person with a solid hope as a member of the eternal kingdom of God. When your life is invaded by the Spirit, you have a new way of seeing life, a new way of thinking. And now you can know with absolute assurance that your life, your job, your marriage, your health are all in the hands of the Lord Jesus. You become a pilgrim, a foreigner to this world, but a citizen of a greater and everlasting one.

Let's prepare ourselves to come to the Lord's Table, where we will celebrate our hope with the One who said the next time he eats this meal will be with us in his consummated kingdom, when all hopes will be fulfilled (Matthew 26:29).

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. What are some of the ways the word “hope” is used? How does the unbelieving world’s understanding of hope differ from Peter’s explanation of our living hope?
2. What are some of your observations of the world’s hopelessness apart from Christ?
3. Peter addressed his letter to followers of Jesus who had been displaced and scattered into unknown and sometimes hostile places. How do you think his address to them about their being God’s chosen people (1-2) might have encouraged them?
4. What is the significance of the image used by Jesus (John 3) and in our text of the “new birth”? What does it mean to you regarding your experience with Christ?
5. Peter speaks about our faith being refined by the fires of testing (7). Has this been true in your experience? Reflect and share with your group.
6. What do you think is meant by our lives being shielded (5) but not sheltered from troubles? In what ways are believers protected and delivered?
7. How can trials produce stronger faith and hope?
8. Spend some time alone or with your group in prayer for mutual encouragement in hope.

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