

Exiles of the Living Hope

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[0 : 0 0] So I want to start with a question. And the question is, what does it mean to be a Christian? Many of us here this afternoon have been Christians for a long time, some of us for a short time.

And some of us might not necessarily call themselves Christians. But wherever you fall in those different brackets, I wonder how you'd answer that question. Because even if you have been a Christian for a really long time, this is a really important question to keep coming back to.

Churches, they were struggling. They were struggling and suffering because they followed Jesus. And so as Peter begins his letter, he begins with this outpouring of praise.

Outpouring of praise to God that's really tailored to help his readers understand what it means to be a Christian. In particular, he wants, as he begins this letter, to show them that faith in Jesus is worth it.

Even when things get tough. If we don't understand what it means to be a Christian, it will functionally be nothing more than a lifestyle choice.

[1 : 1 0] And in a culture like ours that increasingly finds Christianity and its message sometimes difficult, sometimes problematic, it's really important that we have confidence that there is substance to this faith that we have.

What I hope that we're going to see is that following Jesus is so much more than just a lifestyle choice and has consequences for this life and importantly, for the life to come.

So who are we as Christians? Well, as I've already sort of half introduced this series, we are exiles on mission. That's the overarching theme as we work through this letter. We are exiles in a culture because we belong to the culture in one sense and yet in another we're also quite different from it.

We exist in two worlds, as it were, and that often causes tension. And so as we work through this letter, we're going to see how that tension plays itself out, but also how God works through it.

And as exiles on mission, we have a purpose. God uses his people and his church in his plans. We have a task ahead of us as God's people.

[2 : 2 5] Because to be a Christian, it's not a static existence. It's to be called and equipped to bring Jesus to a world that doesn't know him. And every Christian is part of that mission.

There's no small or insignificant person in the church. We're all important. We all have our role to play. Ultimately, we have a mission to make disciples and share the gospel.

And so to start thinking about this idea of being exiles on mission, we have to first get it clear in our heads what it means to be a Christian. What does it mean to be an exile for the name of Christ?

And so Peter's contention at the beginning of this letter is that to be a Christian is to be, in a sense, an exile of the living hope that we have through Jesus. And so Peter makes four observations about life in Christ, which I realize I haven't put up on the screen, but I hope you'll forgive me for that.

The four points as we work through are to be exiles. To be a Christian is to be exiles. To have a living hope. To suffer joyfully. And lastly, to receive salvation.

[3 : 35] So let's unpack what these things mean. To be exiles. Peter begins his letter by calling his readers exiles. It's a phrase that I've mentioned quite a lot already. So he says in verse one, Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to God's elect exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.

And so as we've begun our time in this letter, you might have thought exile is a bit of an odd way to describe the Christian life. Because exile doesn't have particularly positive connotations.

No one chooses to be in exile, do they? Living in exile is not a pleasant experience. It's to live in a sort of no man's land, stateless almost. No one wants to be a refugee or an asylum seeker, cut off from family and culture and homeland.

And yet, that's kind of the idea that Peter's giving to us as he explains at the beginning of this letter here what it means to be a Christian. He's not making a dragon's den pitch about how easy being a Christian is.

He's being really honest. Christians are exiles in the different cities and different cultures that they live in. And as I said, no one chooses to be in exile, do they? It's something rather that happens to you.

[4 : 57] And this is the case with Christians. We are, as Peter says, elect exiles. Or maybe another way of phrasing that is called to be exiles. This is something that Peter then expands on in verse 2.

Because he tells his readers that you 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.

The experience of following Jesus is not so much a choice that we make, but a compulsion that we follow when God calls us. And when we recognize that Jesus is the Son of God, we are compelled to be his.

And we're called out of whatever life that we once had into this new life of exile. The cultures that Peter's readers grew up in, they were no longer cultures where they felt totally at home.

They'd been called by Jesus, and so now they were primarily citizens of his kingdom. And the result is that their own culture began to feel much more alien and less compatible with the new life that they have in Christ and the way that he calls his followers to live.

[6 : 17] And that's the same for Christians today, isn't it? If you're a Christian, you maybe know that feeling that sometimes you don't feel quite at home in this world or in this culture that we find ourselves in.

We live in Glasgow. We love Glasgow. But sometimes there's just this kind of disconnect. There's this tension. You can feel the tension sometimes in the different attitudes to God and Jesus that the prevailing culture would have in comparison to our attitudes to God and Christ.

You can feel it in ethical approaches. For example, divergent approaches to sex and gender. There's a tension there, isn't there? You can feel it in maybe the different priorities that we might have and those of our friends and family and colleagues.

For example, we might have quite different attitudes to career or family or to money. And even just in the conversations that we have with others, you can just tell there's this kind of disconnect.

We're coming from different places, from different worldviews, working on different assumptions. There's this tension because we are exiles. But we're not quite stateless because we do belong to Christ.

[7 : 39] And that trumps everything that we lose whenever we are called to be exiles. Peter says the Father has chosen us. He says that the Holy Spirit is at work within us, changing us, setting us apart to be gods.

And he says that we've been called now to be obedient and to be sprinkled with the blood of Jesus. That call to obedience and the springing of blood, these are images of covenant.

Throughout history, God has made covenants with his people. Promises that those he calls will be his people and they will be his God.

In the Exodus story, for example, God freed his people from slavery in Egypt and he led them through the wilderness on a journey to the promised land.

Not long after they had fled Egypt, they'd been brought through the waters of the Red Sea. God met with his people on Mount Sinai. And he set them apart in this ceremony where he called them to obedience and sprinkled them with blood as a sign of the covenant that he was making with them.

[8 : 49] A mark of that promise that he would be their God. What Peter's telling us is that through Jesus, God has made an even better covenant with his people.

Jesus died on the cross. He shed his own blood so that he could redeem us from the power of sin. And his blood is the sign of this new and better covenant that Christians are able to enjoy.

A covenant that marks us out as having the promises of eternal life in the name of Jesus. Because Christians are exiles in a world that is not their home.

But in becoming exiles, we also become citizens of heaven. Citizens of a new covenant in God through Jesus. We are resident aliens awaiting a promise of a future inheritance.

And that's where our home is. We aren't stateless. Rather, we're exiles on our way to Christ's new creation. Christians have a hope in a better promised land.

[9 : 59] A creation that Christ is bringing about completely free from evil, pain, sin, and suffering. We're exiles because we have a hope for something better.

And this is what Peter calls a living hope. This is our second point. To be a Christian is to have a living hope. It's at this point in his letter, after his introduction, that Peter just lapses into outpourings of praise and worship.

He says, The Christian hope is a living hope.

Perhaps a bit of a curious phrase. But I think it really gets to the heart of why Christianity is so distinctive and so wonderful.

It's a hope that is literally rooted in life. We all have hopes, don't we? We've all got things floating around in our heads that we hope will happen to us.

[11 : 14] Expectations, dreams, desires. And equally, we've also got a lot of things which we maybe hope will not happen to us. The poet Alexander Pope, he once made the amusing comment that, Blessed is he who expects nothing, for he shall never be disappointed.

And we all know, don't we, what it is to have our hopes dashed. So we can maybe sympathize with that kind of attitude. But Christianity doesn't do that.

Christianity doesn't ruin our dreams. And that's what makes it so wonderful. Because Christianity offers a hope that does not fail.

Living hope rooted in the resurrection of Jesus. So just as Jesus' death brings Christians into a new covenant relationship with God, Jesus' resurrection gives them a promise of a future where they will never die.

And an inheritance that goes with it that will also last forever. This is crucial to understanding just what it means to be a Christian. Death.

[12 : 24] Death. Death. Death is, of course, something which comes for us all. We all know that death is a haunting, terrible thing. Even in our day and age, when we have the most advanced medicines of any generation, death still comes.

Listen to the novelist Julian Barnes. This is him recounting the death of his father. He died a modern death in a hospital without his family, attended in his final minutes by a nurse.

Months, indeed years, after medical science had prolonged his life to a point where the terms on which it was being offered were unimpressive. I find Barnes' words quite moving because this is probably the future that awaits most of us.

And in fact, for many of us, that might be the best that we can hope for at that point. And that's really quite a grim expectation. Now, Christianity doesn't give us an escape from that.

But it does give us a promise of something after, something better, something beyond, a promise that that is not the end.

[13 : 43] Christianity promises us resurrection and an inheritance. And whereas most inheritances are a mixed blessing because they rest on a loved one dying, the inheritance of Jesus rests on his resurrection.

Because he lives, those who believe in him will live and receive the inheritance that he freely gives us as a gift. Peter tells us, 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.

Like all inheritances, we have to wait for it. That's why we have a living hope. Because we are still waiting. There's this process of waiting to receive what has been promised.

Like God's people after the Exodus, waiting to enter the promised land. And our inheritance will be revealed when Jesus returns in power and in glory.

And until then, Christians live a life of living hope. Anticipating the day when we enter eternity and receive the inheritance of heaven that has been promised to us.

[15 : 07] We are people of the living hope. Exiles of the living hope, if you will. And our identity is rooted in it. We're people of the resurrection because we have a promise of life and an inheritance when Jesus returns.

So you can see why Peter lapses into these flights of praise and worship. Because in Christ there is life. The promise of life is what it means to be a Christian.

It's why we worship God. It's also why we persevere. Because though we live in this world that is marked by death, we have a promised future of life.

This brings us to Peter's third observation about Christianity. And that is that Christians suffer joyfully. Just as none of us can escape those grim claws of death, so also very few of us are going to escape the thousand griefs and heartache that mark human life.

Hard times and suffering, they're part and parcel of our experience, aren't they? And sometimes even following Jesus can be the cause of that pain. Jesus himself actually makes that very clear.

[16 : 29] He said that the call to follow him, it would divide families. And he characterized following him as taking up one's cross, which is a method of execution. And Jesus himself suffered terribly and died ignominiously.

The Christians that Peter writes to, they were discovering exactly what it means to take up one's cross and follow Jesus. They were suffering because they followed him.

And so Peter, at this early point in his letters, beginning to help them understand why God is allowing them to suffer. And this is a huge question, and we can only touch on it briefly here.

But because suffering for Jesus is one of the major concerns across the letter of 1 Peter, it's an issue that we're going to come to again and again. So we are going to work through it in more detail in weeks and months to come.

But let's just have a look at what he says initially on the subject in verses 6 and 7 of this chapter. He says, What Peter's saying is that God allows his people to suffer because it is the crucible in which faith is tested, proven, and developed.

[18 : 14] Peter makes this comparison with gold. Gold is, of course, valuable, and gold can still perish, even though it is refined in fire. But faith, on the other hand, is worth far more than gold, and it can last forever.

To slightly twist a well-known phrase, they may take our lives, but they will never take our faith. It should come as no surprise that like gold, in order for faith to mature and be refined, it must be tested.

If gold must go through fire, Peter argues, how much more faith? But faith, unlike gold, will not perish. The result of that crucible, it is hoped, will be praise and glory and honor.

Because when faith is tested, you find out whether it is real. And you will find that you are more confident to trust God in all circumstances, because in suffering, you learn that God is truly with you.

It is for this reason that Christians can be joyful, even though they will likely suffer, whether it is for their faith, or the suffering that is common to all people.

[19 : 35] Now, one might argue, perhaps, that this makes God seem cruel and capricious. One might argue that he tests people with suffering and pain just to prove their faith.

And they might question why God would do that. I don't think it's true that God is cruel at all. He does test people, but he tells us in his word that he never gives his people more than we can bear.

He never views us as playthings that he toys with. Scripture never, ever gives us that sense. Constantly, the Bible tells us that we are his children.

He is our father. He grieves with us when we suffer. And one of the most helpful illustrations of this, I think, is the tears of Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus.

He is with us in our grief, and he grieves with us in our grief and suffering. And Christ himself, he went through the deepest depths of suffering on our behalf.

[20 : 41] He went through hell. He knows what it is to suffer. But nevertheless, even though he knows all this, he doesn't always airlift us out of situations of difficulty.

He often lets us go through them. In fact, the suffering of Christ becomes the pattern for us. But Jesus never leaves our side when suffering comes, and that is how our faith grows.

We learn that God is with us in the crucible. He walks with us in the furnace, and we learn that he is there. And in time, we become more and more like our Lord.

Though we do not see him, we love him and believe in him as he sustains us through the fiery trial. This is what Peter says. 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.

[21 : 54] Suffering makes it hard to stay the course. But Christians can suffer joyfully because their suffering proves their faith. Whilst we do not see Jesus now, we love him and believe in him and rejoice in him because we know that the final trumpet blast of salvation is coming.

That's something that's certain. And we know that he is with us in his Holy Spirit until that day. And now I know some of us here this afternoon will be going through really tough times.

Some of us will be really struggling. And most of us will have known tough and difficult times in the past. And if things are good now, we all know that hard times are just around the corner.

We know that life is full of struggle and trial and difficulty. That is life. We know that firsthand. And so, I don't want to sound trite when I speak of suffering.

I know and you know just how real it is. But what Peter wants us to grasp is this. Don't let suffering teach you that God has abandoned you.

[23 : 08] Let suffering teach you that your faith is real. That God is present with you. That Christ is there and he cares.

He's with us in the fire. He will sustain you till the very end. And in him, you have a living hope that even death has lost its sting.

What sustains us in our suffering and keeps us alive is this living hope in Christ. This promised salvation. The end of our faith is the salvation that we have in Jesus.

And this is our final point. Being a Christian is to receive salvation. At the end of that last verse I read, verse 10, Peter said that we are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

That is, as Christians, we have been saved by Jesus and we are looking forward to a future when we receive all the benefits and fullness of that salvation.

[24 : 14] Namely, that everlasting life and that future without sin and death that we've already spoken about. What Peter wants to do as he finishes up these introductory words to his hearers is he wants them, he wants to remind them of just how wonderful and incredible this salvation is.

Remember, these are Christians who are suffering because they follow Jesus. And it's when trials and suffering come that we're most likely to throw in the towel. It can be, suffering can be and should be a crucible to our faith, but it can also be the hurdle that leaves us thinking that following Jesus is not worth it and is of no real benefit in the real world.

And so Peter wants to make clear just how wonderful it is to receive salvation in the name of Jesus. And so what he does is he contrasts Christians with the prophets who came before Jesus and the angels who are in heaven.

Of the prophets in the Old Testament, he says this, concerning this salvation, the prophets who spoke of the grace that was to come to you searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow.

That is, they wanted to see the one that they were prophesying about. They wanted to know the depths of the salvation that they were promising.

[25 : 47] They wanted to see and to understand the sufferings and the glory of the Messiah that was to come. All these things that they were saying, they wanted to experience it. But they didn't get that.

They all died before Jesus came. They were still waiting. And of the angels, Peter says, even angels long to look into these things.

What are these things? Well, it's the reality that the prophets were looking forward to. It was revealed to them, this is the prophets, says Peter, that they were not serving themselves, but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven.

The prophets were speaking about things which only appeared with Jesus and the message of the gospel, which these Christians and we ourselves have heard and believed.

A message that comes from the Holy Spirit. the prophets, they longed to see the fulfillment of everything that they were anticipating, but they were instead serving the future.

[27 : 00] The angels, they longed to understand these things, but even they cannot, in some mysterious way, even they can't fully enter into all the fullness of the blessings that we, as Christians, have through Jesus.

And the point is, the point that Peter's trying to make is that Christian hope, this living hope, this salvation, it's not some arbitrary hope. It's not some imaginary hope.

It's not this, it's not a hope that springs from our own minds. This is a hope which has been promised for thousands of years before Jesus. It's a hope that has shown itself to be reliable for the 2,000 and more years of Christ's church.

And though the church doesn't always get things right, the salvation that Christians have in Jesus never goes wrong. It's as real as the ground that we stand on.

This is the hope that Peter wants his readers and us to have confidence in. So what does it, as we come back to that question we started with as we head towards our close, what does it mean to be a Christian?

[28 : 18] Over Christmas I read an article by the journalist Ed West that was suggesting that there's a move in certain circles to see a renewed value in Christianity. Writers such as Tom Holland and Louise Perry and others are examples of this move.

Writers who, though not necessarily Christians themselves, see something wonderfully good in Christianity and recognize much of the goods that we see in the world stems from the radical changes brought about by the rise of the Christian faith.

And West calls them the new theists. As the article notes, however, the argument is not that religion is true, but that it is useful and has made the West unusually successful.

And really interestingly, the article concludes, that Christianity is not some meditation method or get happy quick guide. It is a deeply strange idea, which makes it to triumph over the West all the more unlikely, dare one say, miraculous.

I don't know where exactly the author's coming from. I don't know if they have faith or not, but he's absolutely right. Christianity is strange. And it's not a system per se.

[29 : 34] It's not even a worldview. It's a person. You can recognize the value of Christianity for its morals, for its ethics, its history, its culture, or its community.

All good things, but Christianity isn't any one of those things. Christianity, as the name suggests, is Christ. And the real person, Jesus Christ, is the one who makes all the difference.

It's him the prophets longed to see. It's him who saves us from ourselves and the darkness in our lives. It's him who gives us a living hope and a promise of salvation and eternal life.

And it is he who is worth suffering for and being an exile for. To be a Christian, it doesn't mean that life is going to be free from trouble, but it does mean life is better.

It's better because we have Jesus. Through Jesus, we are called to be God's elect exiles waiting for that promise of a future inheritance that will, in no uncertain terms, be ours when Jesus returns.

[30 : 55] Through Jesus, we are called to be God's covenant people and loved by God. In him, we have a living hope that sustains us and nourishes us day by day by day.

A hope of everlasting life because Jesus has been raised from the dead. And though trials and suffering, they will come. They're not going to beat us down.

They're not going to destroy us. Rather, we will be built up in our faith. We will have more confidence that God is with us. We will praise his glorious name even in the depths of the darkest day because salvation in the name of Jesus is the greatest gift that has ever been known to man.

Even angels wonder with awe at what God has done for his people. that's what it means to be a Christian. If you know him, praise God.

He's called you to an imperishable inheritance that will never spoil or fade. And if you don't, he's calling you right now.

[32 : 13] He's calling you to know Jesus and receive that living hope, that promise of something better. future. He's calling you so he is slowly about things aspis that know everybody■ and take the Imagine principal and the■ Froomy will move on and hear the chance of