

Living with Hope

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[0 : 00] The teenager, nervously awaiting the arrival of exam results. The accused standing before the judge. The parent anxiously waiting by the hospital bed of their child.

! The refugee fleeing their home before the bombs hit. What connects all these scenarios? Well, it's hope. Hope is one of the miracles of the human condition.

Hope keeps us going. Hope keeps us striving. Hope always offers the possibility of change. Without hope, we wither and fade. And hope is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian.

This is our last sermon looking at 1 Peter. When I started this series about nine months ago, I thought the central idea of the letter was about being exiles a mission, as the graphic up there shows.

And whilst that idea is certainly present, I think now that the heart of the letter is actually about living with hope. So, right back at the start of the letter, Peter writes, Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[1 : 05] 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.

And I wonder, what are the sort of things that we're inclined to hope for? What are the hopes that guide what we do? We might hope for wealth, or at least for comfort and security, and a decent pension.

We might have hopes for our health, that we will stay in good shape until the end. We might have hopes for our children, that they will be happy, healthy, and successful.

We might even have hopes for our own success, and our own career progression. And we certainly have hopes that we're going to avoid tragedy. But what happens when these hopes don't materialize?

What happens when these hopes are dashed? The problem with these hopes, which I suspect we all have to one degree or another, is that they are dead hopes.

[2 : 10] And what I mean by that is that they're uncertain. They're expectations without foundations. And when or if they don't appear, they may well drive us to despair.

But Peter speaks instead about a living hope. A hope that Jesus has been raised from the dead, and a hope that he will be with you through every storm, and will at the end bring you into his eternal kingdom where there are no storms.

As we've gone through the letter, Peter's spent much of it counseling suffering Christians. He's been reminding them that they have this living hope. A hope of resurrection and new life.

And that hope has been sustaining them. And as the letter draws to a conclusion, Peter is once again thinking about the particular hope of the Christian.

And he shows us that this living hope in Jesus can and will change your approach to life. He shows us that it's a more secure hope than all our other hopes, and one that creates a better world.

[3 : 19] Because a living hope, and these are our three points that we want to think about, a living hope restrains abuses of power, calms the frenzy of life, and breaks the power of evil.

So our first point, living hope restrains abuses of power. Why do people abuse power? Well often it's because they place their hope and their identity in that power.

Their hope is in their position and what they can do with it. For even the most idealistic, a power itself and leadership itself can become the goal, can become the hope.

A politician can be elected to high office with the very best of intentions of serving others. But when their hope is in what they can do with a position of power, well their focus will become, will turn to be on maintaining that position rather than on serving others.

A guy can date a girl with the best intentions of loving her well, but when he sees that he can have a degree of control over her, he can, as many do, try to assert power and dominance over her.

[4 : 26] Because his hope is in how the girl can satisfy his desires. And an elder or a minister in the church, who is given the responsibility to care for God's people, can soon see his position and his authority as more important than humbly looking after the sheep who are in his care.

His hope is in his position, his authority and how he is seen by others. One of the positive developments, I think, of the age that we live in is a growing culture of whistleblowing, of calling out abuses of power.

But most abuses still go unchecked and they run rife through our culture. Why? Because people put their hope in power and what it can get them.

But Peter says to the leaders in the church, to the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who will also share in the glory to be revealed.

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them, not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be. Not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve.

[5 : 39] Not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

Peter here is contrasting two types of leadership. He's contrasting leadership rooted in a living hope in Christ with most of the leadership that we see in the world.

He urges the elders in the church to be shepherds, to care for the church like a shepherd pastors a flock, with care, with sacrifice.

He urges the elders to watch over people, not out of a sense of compulsion, but with a willing heart. And he tells them that leadership is not an opportunity for lining their own pockets or bolstering their own reputation.

Leadership is about eager service. He reminds them that leadership is not about abusing the power they have, and it is not about controlling people that they have responsibility for.

[6 : 39] It is about leading by example, not with an iron rod, but with a gentle hand. But what will keep the leaders in the church from falling into these patterns that we see in the world, the patterns of unhealthy leadership, abusive leadership, that we see all over the world and can also see in the church?

Well, the answer is, I think, a better hope. Peter appeals to the church leaders, not as an apostle, but instead as a fellow elder, as a fellow witness, and crucially, as one who will also share in the glory to be revealed.

He says again, when the chief shepherd appears, i.e. Jesus, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away. The hope of the Christian leader is not and must not be in their position.

Their hope must be instead in the living hope of Jesus, the promise of his return and a crown of glory that will never fade, because crowns here on earth will not last.

It reminds me of the musical Hamilton, which we rewatched recently. And in it, Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr become so fixated on their legacy, that it drives them to destroy those around them whom they love and themselves.

[8 : 02] A legacy might well be secured, but it comes at the cost of themselves and the cost of others. The crowns that earthly power gives are fickle and destructive, but the crown of glory that Christ offers is a crown of life.

Of course, the tragedy is that many Christian leaders get this very, very wrong. You might already be thinking of examples. One of the most shocking that came to light a few years ago was Ravi Zacharias, who was an international Christian speaker and evangelist.

And not long after he died, it came out that he'd been horrifically abusing his position of power for years to solicit explicit images and sexual favors from women.

One woman said that after he arranged for the ministry to provide her with financial support, he required sex from her. Zacharias made her pray with him to thank God for the opportunity they both received and called her his reward for living a life of service to God.

This is an extreme case of shocking and abusive leadership. And it's pure evil, particularly the way he used the name of God to commit such terrible abuse.

[9 : 18] But notice where his hope was. Though he might have been using the language of Christianity in the language of God, his hope was not in him. His hope was in a reward here and

now.

He saw his position of authority as a route to certain rewards and pleasures that he felt he deserved. And I do wonder if he actually had had his hope in Jesus and the eternal crown, whether he wouldn't have done those dreadful things.

And so this passage is a charge and a warning to pastors and elders in this church. I include myself. We as pastors and elders must fix our eyes on Christ and the heavenly reward.

Not on whatever earthly rewards we think we might deserve or anything else for that matter. Our hope must be Christ alone. We must look to Jesus as the chief shepherd and recognize that we are under shepherds.

And we look not just to our eternal reward, but to our perfect example. Jesus, who though he deserved everything, gave it all up. And so Jesus himself said, You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and their high officials exercise authority over them.

[10 : 37] Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant. And whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the son of man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Jesus gave up the joys of heaven to give us a living hope. He died on the cross for the benefit and salvation of those who rejected him. That's true leadership.

That's Christ-like leadership. He said, I'm the good shepherd. And the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. And so he is our pattern for leadership that is truly selfless and has no hint of abuse in it.

And even when church leaders do abuse their position, one thing that we can all remember is that our hope is not in them. Our hope is not in pastors. Our hope is in Christ himself.

The one who laid down his life for you to give you a living hope. And this living hope impacts everyone who has it, not just leaders.

[11 : 45] In fact, a living hope enables all who have it to embrace calm in the midst of the frenzy of life. Life can be a frenzy, can't it?

When we leave here after our time worshipping together, it'll be off home to get ready for Monday.

And it might well feel like you're not able to actually step off the treadmill until the weekend.

Or it actually might be that the weekend will come around and it'll add its own challenges and just ramp up the pressure even more. Life is busy. Life is full of worry. Life is still open.

Life is still open. Take a moment. Take a moment. Take a moment. Take a moment. Take a moment. Take a moment.

Take a moment. Take a moment. Take a moment. Take a moment. Take a moment. Take a moment. Take a moment.

[12 : 40] So much pressure, so much to do, so much expectation, so little time, so little rest, and so many are either running to burnout or stuck in a state of paralyzed anxiousness.

And there's a particular pressure to succeed and to be the best versions of ourselves. Social media tempts us to compare ourselves to others all the time, how we look, how good our social circle is, what we do, what we earn.

And the cultural message for years has been that you've got to follow your dreams, you've got to pursue your greatest hope. And the pressure's on, isn't it, to make that hope a reality.

But of course for many that hope is not realized, and for the ones who do manage to achieve it, well it often falls far short of those dreamy expectations. Anxiety, frenzy, the feeling of failure.

Abuse of power is one marker of the world that we live in, this is another. We need a better hope that can calm our anxious hearts.

[13 : 48] But how that hope in Jesus looks is rather counter-cultural, and it's seen in humility. Peter writes, In the same way, you who are younger, submit yourselves to your elders.

All of you, clothe yourselves with humility towards one another, because God opposes the proud, but shows favor to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.

Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. Humility is not a quality that's often prized highly. It will get you few rewards, and it will not make you noticed.

But that's just the point. Our culture pressures us to be the very best that we can be, and to show that to the world in every way that we can, because our hope so often rests on being noticed, on

being celebrated, and on being valued for our talents and our contributions.

But humility is rooted in a hope that is much more solid and much less pressured. The hope of an eternity with Jesus means we don't need to sacrifice everything on the altar of our hopes and dreams.

[15:02] Which is why Peter counsels the young members of the church to submit themselves to the elders. Instead of assuming that we are right, Peter encourages humble submission.

And there's a freedom that comes with that. But it's not just the young. Peter says that all Christians ought to clothe themselves in humility. That is, it should be a trait that's always seen in us.

Because God has no time for those who are proud and arrogant, but he does care for the humble.

Humility is a freeing thing, because it allows us to omit our failings, and to omit that we can't do it all, and can't always be the person that we wish we could be.

Humility recognizes our weaknesses, but also doesn't make us feel like failures. Humility allows us to see ourselves as we really are.

And humility allows us to place our trust and our hope, not in ourselves, which is always going to lead to burnout, to failure, and to anxiety, but in God.

[16:08] God is so much bigger than us, and he cares deeply about us. Humble yourselves therefore, says Peter, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.

Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. Peter's point is that when we cast all our cares and anxieties upon God, we are placing our hope in him, and the future he has promised through Jesus.

An eternal future. He will lift us up in due time. But when we try to lift ourselves up, we will almost certainly stumble and fall. There's a song I quite like by the Canadian band Arcade Fire called The Suburbs.

It's a song that looks at the way as we get older, we become warped and changed by the pressures and challenges of life. We get sucked into this world of pressures and anxieties.

One of the verses in the song goes, So can you understand why I want a daughter while I'm still young? I want to hold her hand, show her some beauty before the damage is done.

[17:19] Perhaps this gets at something Jesus said. He said that if anyone wants to be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, they have to become like a little child. A little child isn't jostling to assert their identity and pursue their dreams.

A little child understands what it means to rely on others and rest in that reliance. A little child understands implicitly hope and humility.

Humility and living hope are freeing in the midst of the frenzy because we don't need to rely on ourselves. We can rest in the hands of God.

When it all feels too much, as it inevitably will, if we have a living hope in Jesus, God invites us to cast all of our anxieties on him because he cares for you and he knows you by name and has a future for you.

One that will never end. So a living hope in Jesus and in an eternal future with him restrains abuses of power and calms us in the frenzy of life but it also, and this is our final point, breaks the power of evil.

[18:37] No one can deny that there is a world of evil out there. One only has to watch the news to see how much darkness there is in the world. We see the devastation caused by wars in Ukraine and in Israel and the Middle East.

We see the evils of corruption at every level and we see the horror of sexual crimes knowing that very few are reported and most perpetrators are able to get away with their crimes.

The world is a very dark place and if we're sheltered from that darkness, well then we're very blessed indeed. The Bible has a lot to say about the darkness and the evil that's present in the world.

Indeed, the Bible's clear that much of it originates within our own hearts but that's not the focus here. The focus here is on an evil power at work in the world, a spiritual power, the devil.

C.S. Lewis writing about his journey to faith once observed, one of the things that surprised me when I first read the New Testament seriously was that it talked so much about a dark power in the universe, a mighty evil spirit who was held to be the power behind death and disease and sin.

[19:47] And Lewis knew, as you probably do as well, that mention of the devil can immediately sound incredulous, especially at the end of October when little kids are going to be dressed up in

devil horns and carrying pitchforks as they ask for sweets on your doorstep.

We all know that there is evil in the world. Christianity at least offers reasons reasons for why there is such evil and such darkness. Though our post-enlightenment society can often mock the idea of a supernatural force of evil, it is at least an explanation that accounts for what we see and observe, that accounts for the darkness, that terrorizes the world we live in.

The horns, the hooves, and the pitchforks actually have nothing to do with the devil as he's talked about in the Bible. The Bible isn't interested in what he looks like, but it is interested in showing us his character and why he is, in fact, dangerous.

He's often personified as a beast, hungry, feral, powerful even. He appears as a serpent in the Garden of Eden, poison dripping from his words.

He's described as the sea monster, Leviathan, and a dragon. And here Peter says that he's like a lion. And so Peter says, Be alert and of sober mind.

[21 : 08] Your enemy, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

1 Peter is a letter about persevering and suffering. And in the final chapter, Peter reminds his readers that behind the evil and the suffering that they've been experiencing is a real spiritual enemy.

What does the devil want? Well, throughout the Bible story, the devil wants people not to put their hope in God. He wants them to build their hopes on anything else, hopes on things that will crumble.

He came to Adam and Eve to convince them not to listen to God's words and to put their hope in becoming like God instead. To put their hope in their own wisdom instead of in God. And the result was death.

He came to Jesus and tried to convince him to put his hope in his own power, even in his identity as the son of God. And even tried to give him a way out of the suffering that was to come by offering all the kingdoms of the world.

[22 : 20] The promises were hollow and would have come with a sting had Jesus put his hope in anything but his father. Thankfully, Jesus did put his hope in his father.

And the devil comes to us to lure us away from God, away from a solid hope. For the first readers of this letter, he was making them suffer so that they would be tempted to pack it all in and stop putting their hope in Jesus.

But he can also lure us with promises of pleasure or comfort or security. Whatever it might be, he knows our weaknesses and our particular pressure points.

And so this is why we need to be alert and sober-minded. There is a wonderful future hope in Jesus. But there is a force opposed to him whose desire is that no one would make it there, make it to that future hope.

And Peter reminds his readers that actually this is to be expected. They aren't the only ones suffering for the hope that they have. There are churches all over the world suffering just like them and that's the same today.

[23 : 29] There are Christians all over the world today suffering for that living hope that they have in Jesus. But it's not a hope that's in vain because holding on to that hope breaks the power of evil.

And so Peter writes, And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm, and steadfast.

To him be the power forever and ever. Amen. There is a world of evil out there. The Christian hope is that Christ will bring us to a world without evil.

Imagine that. A world where you don't even need to hope because all your hopes have been fulfilled in Jesus. A world where there is no pain, no shame, no tears, no fears.

The world you know this world should be, but isn't. And now, you will almost certainly suffer at some point in this life and in this world.

[24 : 36] And if you're a Christian, you will certainly know the reality of the devil stalking you like a lion stalks its prey. But this is a promise. This is a promise that God gives us.

The God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm, and steadfast.

I think a helpful picture of what this future hope is like is captured well at the end of The Lord of the Rings. Frodo, after all his trials and after facing down the very depths of evil itself, stays steadfast through his suffering.

And at the story's end, is taken by ship to the Undying Lands. It's Tolkien's picture of paradise. And he writes, The ship went out into the high sea and passed on into the west until at last, on a night of rain, Frodo smelled a sweet fragrance on the air and heard the sound of singing that came over the water.

The grey rain curtain turned all to silver glass and was rolled back. And he beheld white shores and beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise.

[26 : 00] Tolkien's prose, it is beautiful there, and that's just a tiny little picture of what's promised to the one whose hope is in Jesus and the one who holds out that hope until the very end.

But I think it's wonderful because it captures the peace and the beauty of what God promises us in Christ. this peace and beauty are what God promises to the one who has their hope in Jesus.

And hence, Peter's final words are an encouragement to stand fast. Stand fast because this is a hope that will not fail. It is a hope built on a firm foundation.

God will not let us down. And so as we finish, I wonder, what are your dearest hopes? And how broken will you be if they don't come to pass?

Jesus offers us a living hope, a hope of resurrection when he returns in glory, a hope of eternal life, a hope of white shores and a far green country when this world and all its evil are wrapped up like a scroll, a hope of life as it was meant to be, living hope in the name of Jesus, the Lord and giver of life.

[27 : 28] Let's pray.