

Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, Tennessee
Dr. Jay Howell
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“When Going Gets Tough: Living Hope”
1 Peter 1:1-9

Today we begin a 5-week series in the letter of 1 Peter, titled “When Going Gets Tough.” Pastor Rachel was the primary architect of this series, so a word of gratitude to her a) for drawing up this series, and b) doing a lot of the legwork. For that matter, a general footnote: if you find something I say to be especially enlightening or poignant, the correct answer is that it was the Holy Spirit, but it was probably Rachel. If you find something boring and uninteresting, probably me. Our hope for this series is to offer an overview of the Letter of 1 Peter, but not just by giving a big picture lecture series, but by looking at five specific passages that we hope give a good cross-section of what the letter’s about. That’s something, by the way, we’re going to try to do at least once a year: do an overview of an entire book of the Bible by exploring selected passages that give a good representation of the whole book.

1 Peter is all about hope for the people of God, precisely when the trials and hardship come. Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Though 1 Peter might be all about hope, it’s not the fool’s kind, not the pipe dream kind. It’s a hope that has been forged, one that has been tested and proven genuine. He calls it, as he says in v. 3, a “living hope.” We’ll get to what grounds that hope in a little bit, but first a little bit about what challenged it, what forged it.

There was a shadow that hung over the world in which Peter lived—along with Paul or James or John, Jesus too for that matter—the world in which the events of the Gospels and the early church took place, a shadow that looms over all the words of the New Testament that perhaps we don’t recognize as easily today: the shadow of the emperor, the shadow of Caesar. Hangs over everything, really, seeped into every corner of ancient life. The imperial cult, they call it, emperor worship, and in a lot of ways it rivaled, some might say surpassed, the worship of even the Roman gods. And in a lot of the New Testament, it’s impossible to separate some of the things Jesus says or Paul says or, in this case, Peter says without also hearing the name of Caesar in the background.

Even what we might hear as the most benign, the most pleasant of niceties are in fact anything but. Take how Peter begins the body of his letter. First, he introduces himself and greets his intended readers, then he says in vv. 2-3, “May grace and peace be yours in abundance. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!” Now we hear that, and we think, well, isn’t that nice? Inoffensive, innocuous.

But to those who would hear this letter, there’s a word in there that would make you flinch, maybe make you look over your shoulder to see who else heard it. That word is, “Lord.” He calls Jesus “Lord.”

The reason that was a charged word was because of who else in that world would have typically been called “Lord”: the emperor. And that was a problem, one that perhaps we don’t realize as easily today. See for us, taking a jab at a government leader is more a national pastime, but even outside of comedians, challenge to power is embedded in the way we are governed, so much so that every four years the President subjects himself to a referendum on whether he should continue governing or someone else should, and if the people choose otherwise, the most powerful person in the country—arguably the world—voluntarily gives up that power to someone else. It’s remarkable, historically remarkable, and something which we should never take for granted, least of all this weekend.

But that kind of liberty was not so much the case with an emperor. To many, calling someone else Lord might mean you’re not so content living under Roman rule. Might mean that you’d be suspect to sow discord in the empire or otherwise be a threat. And the threat to the emperor was something Peter was likely all too familiar with.

Tradition holds that Peter wrote this letter from Rome in the late 60s AD. (A good number of scholars think this was written later on by someone else under Peter’s name, but that’s a longer story. Shoot me a line if you’re curious about that.) And if the date and place are true, then it’s as if Peter is sitting in the furnace writing to those who are starting to feel the heat.

The letter itself is addressed to, as it says in v. 1, “the exiles of the Dispersion,” and then lists some regions throughout modern-day Turkey. Interestingly, the language Peter uses here, “exiles, “Dispersion” [also known as the Diaspora], is language that you might expect in reference to Jews, to Israel, but that’s not who Peter’s writing to. He specifies later that he’s writing to Gentile, that is, non-Jewish Christians, but he addresses them as if they were Jewish, as in, part of God’s chosen people, uniting the hardship of the people of Israel, in particular that of the exile, with these Gentile Christians.

If you were with us last week, you’ll remember we talked a lot about the exile and the people of Israel, but the main point to remember is that if you’re an exile, you are a stranger in a foreign land. You live in a place that is not your home. And that makes sense if you’re talking to Jews who are scattered across the Mediterranean world, but it makes less sense if you’re talking to a bunch of non-Jewish Christians who haven’t been scattered anywhere. They live where they live. So why does Peter call them exiles? Why does Peter call them strangers in a foreign land?

The reason is that for the first time in a systematic way, Christians were being ostracized wherever they might’ve lived. Here’s what happened.

Have you ever heard the phrase, “Fiddling while Rome burned,” meaning doing something casual while there was great hardship everywhere? It comes out of this context. Peter is writing during the reign of an emperor named Nero—you may have heard that name, it’s not a popular one. In 64 AD, a fire breaks out in the city. A reminder why fire departments are so important. Over the span of just nine days, 2/3 of the city burned. That’s like if a fire broke out in New York, and all of Manhattan, all of the Bronx, all of Brooklyn, and all of Staten Island burned, leaving only Queens. Nine days, and the city was devastated.

Then while the ashes were still smoldering, Nero, it turns out, didn’t even wait for the coals to get cold before he started building an enormous new palace conveniently in an area where all the buildings had just burned down. So folks started talking. Did he do this? Did he do this just so he could build his palace?

Whether Nero actually did it remains uncertain, but one thing’s for sure: he didn’t want to be the one to get blamed for it, so he looks for someone else to pin it on, and he finds the perfect scapegoat. There was this group of fanatics that many thought were just strange, that for a while

had just been considered a Jewish sect, but now was something very different. So, in a sustained propaganda campaign he placed the blame for the Great Fire of Rome on the Christians there. This began the first major wave of persecution upon Christians. It was the most severe in Rome itself: burnings, crucifixion, fodder for wild animals; but as word spread to other parts of the empire, persecution spread too.

You might be asking yourself, why am I getting this long history lesson? What does this have to do with hope? The reason is because that's who Peter's writing to: these persecuted, Gentile Christians. Put yourself in their shoes. Remember, wherever they were, right up until their conversion to Christianity, they were just like everyone else, and no one batted an eye about them. Now, however, because of something they converted to, they are being ostracized, at best, or worse, arrested, tortured, or killed. And this is something different. Up to this point, Christians might have been thought of as weird, but there wasn't systematic persecution. This hadn't happened before. It would lead even the most faithful to ask, "Is this what I signed up for?"

And that is why Peter is so focused on hope, the foundation of that hope, and how that hope is lived out even in hardship. He's writing to these Gentile Christians who are asking themselves, "What have I gotten myself into?", who are now in danger because of what they confess to believe, because they confess Jesus as Lord, who are feeling like strangers in their own homelands, and to them he is saying, yes, we are in uncharted territory here; yes, there is something very different going on that we haven't seen before.

But that's not reason to give in to despair, because instead of seeing just the new threat, he says, see the new birth: in v. 3 "By his great mercy he has given us a new birth". Instead of seeing just what we've lost, see what waits for us: in v. 4 "into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you." Instead of seeing just how much we're exposed and vulnerable, see how we are sustained and protected: in v. 5, "who are being protected by the power of God through faith."

And a funny, amazing thing happens when we look at hardship through that lens, seeing not what we've lost, but what awaits us: we rejoice. In v. 6, "In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials." We rejoice so much in fact that the very hardship, the very trial we face is seen less as a time of suffering and more as a time in which faith might be revealed: in v. 7, "so that genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."

Can you even imagine that? A hope so consuming, a hope we are so fixated upon that even hardship is less a hardship and more an instance in which the name of Jesus might be magnified—praise and glory and honor as Peter says.

The past five weeks I've been watching the documentary on Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls, "The Last Dance," it's called. I'm sure some of you have seen it too. One thing that comes up is how Jordan would motivate himself. Even after he had won some championships, even after he had all these awards and endorsement deals, even after he should have had nothing left to prove, he would take even the smallest slight, the most casual comment by an opponent and fixate on it to motivate him.

There was one story that came out. The Bulls were playing the Washington then-Bullets in back-to-back games. The Bullets had a rookie named LaBradford Smith. Well in the first game, Smith played lights out, and Jordan did not—and by did not, it meant Jordan still had 25 points in a game the Bulls still won. But after the game, Smith goes up to Jordan and says, "Nice game, Mike." That's it.

Jordan, however, was enraged. Took it as an affront to him from this upstart rookie who was rubbing in the salt after he had such a good game. So for the next game, Jordan said, "I'm going to score in a half what he had in the whole game." And that's exactly what he did. Scored 36 in the first half, 47 in the game.

Years later, however, another witness recalled that Smith had never gone up to Jordan after the first game, never said anything to him, never said "Nice game, Mike." So some people asked Jordan about whether that exchange had even happened. "No," he said, "I made it up." But he had used it to motivate himself for the next game.

Now this metaphor fails on a number of levels. First, this is not to suggest that hope is in any way some kind of competitive vendetta. Second, it's not to suggest that hope is something we make up to psych ourselves up. But at the very least, Jordan's knack to turn what he at first saw as hardship into a chance to prove something, to demonstrate something is in some way what Peter is talking about here: that in the hope we have, the living hope we have, if we are as fixated on and defined by and inspired by and uplifted by it as we could be, then it changes how we see the hardship we face. We see it as a chance to rejoice and glorify the Lord.

Friends, it's no surprise that many of us are facing hardship we had never expected, hardship of a kind we don't understand and couldn't have prepared for. And there is no doubt need for grief and lament, and for us to encourage each other in that grief and lament. But what would happen if we saw these trials as a time for faith, for hope to be revealed, as a time for Christ to be magnified. This is where it's very different from what Jordan would do: this isn't a psychological trick we use to get fired up. It's the very real response, the only real response to belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead: it is hope in a new birth now, a new beginning, hope in something that is completely different, and it is hope for better things to come.

And so I challenge you, friends, this week, as you face struggle, whatever it might be, ask yourself, how might faith be demonstrated here, how might hope be revealed, and how might Christ be glorified in it.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**