

Hope in the Midst of Suffering I Peter 1:1-9

It was Ruth Graham who wrote in her book "The Legacy of a Pack Rat" that she was awakened one morning at 3am. All she could think about was one of her family members who was trying hard to run away from God. As Ruth lay there in bed, her imagination ran wild with fear and worrisome thoughts about her loved one. She writes, "Suddenly, the LORD said to me, 'Quit studying the problem and start studying the Promises.'"

Ruth promptly got out of bed and opened her Bible to Philippians 4:6-7. "*Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.*" Ruth writes, "I put down my Bible and spent time worshipping God...I began to thank God for giving me this loved one in the first place. I even thanked Him for the difficult spots that taught me so much." She writes that as she began to thank God for all the blessings of her life in Christ, that her doubts dissolved and her heart was once again overflowing with joy and faith. "That was when I learned that worship and worry cannot live in the same heart—they are mutually exclusive."

There is a similar message in this passage of Scripture, which Peter penned 1950 years ago under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The recipients of this letter were 1st century followers of Christ who were experiencing all kinds of problems and persecution. Many of them were running for their lives.

What was happening? It was 64-65 AD. It was at this time that Nero, the Roman Emperor, falsely accused the Christians for starting a fire that destroyed much of the city of Rome. Immediately Nero began a very serious series of persecutions against the Christians. You may have heard of some of the horrific things he did to them. Some were dipped in tar and burned as torches to light Nero's gardens. Some he tied to his chariot and dragged through the streets of Rome until they were dead. Some were thrown to lions; others were tied up in leather bags and thrown into the river where they drowned. Those who survived eventually exited the city of Rome. They left their jobs, businesses, friends, family, and they settled in the 5 Provinces mentioned in verse 1 (modern Turkey). Many of them left with just the clothes on their backs.

Peter wrote this letter to encourage and give hope to these believers in the midst of their problems. In it he tells his brothers and sisters in Christ to take their eyes off of the temporary and place them on the eternal. To stop focusing on their pain and persecution, and to focus on the Promises of God and the Eternal Privileges of God's mercy shown to them in Christ. In other words, Peter is instructing them to stop studying the problem and start studying the promises of God. It would do us a world of good to take Peter's message to heart this morning. No matter who you are, or where you are at, this is a relevant message. Many among us are facing some serious problem, pain, or persecution this morning. If not, you will be soon. That is just the nature of our world ever since Adam and Eve's fatal sin. But, we are not hopeless. Jesus said in John 16:33 "In this world you will have trouble. But be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

Peter's words teach us how to live victoriously in the midst of animosity. The only way to survive and thrive in this fallen world is to take our focus off of the temporary problems and to place our focus on

the “Great Mercies of God” given to us in Christ Jesus. Let’s do that this morning! Peter lists 4 of them here in verses 3-8.

#1 In Christ He Has Given us New Birth. 1:3

Read verse 3. If you are in Christ, then you have been born a 2nd time. In order to understand what Peter is talking about here we must first understand our plight as a member of Adams race—the human race. Paul spells it out like this in Ephesians 2:1-3:

“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.”

Here is the Gospel truth that is sometimes hard to swallow: you and I were born with rebellious, sinful hearts. We all have inherited a fallen, sinful nature.

Because of that sinful heart we more often than not follow its sinful appetites and cravings, and soon we are enslaved by sin and by Satan himself.

Because we are spiritually dead, we have no power whatsoever to rescue ourselves or to set ourselves free from this sin, and so we are headed for God’s wrath, doomed for judgment.

But here in Ephesians 2:4 is the wonderful News of the Gospel! *“But because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ...for it is by grace you have been saved through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God...”* Ephesians 2:4-8

God in his rich mercy gives us a new life. In fact, He gives us the faith to be able to trust Him as our Savior; and at that moment He places His Holy Spirit within us and we are re-born, regenerated. It’s like God does open heart surgery and gives us a brand new heart along with a brand new desire to live for His glory. The Apostle Paul affirms this in 2 Corinthians 5:17. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; the old is gone, the new has come!”

Example: It was about 50 years ago as a teen ager that I realized I was dead in my sin. I was raised in a Christian home. I went to Sunday school and church weekly. I sang in the church choir, I attended catechism classes as a teenager, and was confirmed. Yet I had these inner desires that I knew were dark and sinful. But I felt helpless to fight against them—and so I began to pursue sin. And as a result, I had this accumulating pile of guilt and condemnation I carried around and did not know how to deal with. It was at Bible camp that I began to realize I needed a new birth and a new heart. I thank God that on July 12, 1967 Jesus did exactly that. I felt the weight of my sin and guilt was washed away. And it felt like I had been reborn; given a new life with a new desire to live for Him! Peter says, the way to survive and thrive in the midst of problems is to study and focus on this Great Mercy of God: That in Christ He has given me a new birth into a living hope.

#2 In Christ He has Given us a New Inheritance. 1:4

The second gift of God's mercy that Peter mentions is a New Inheritance. Read verse 4. If you are in Christ, then He has given you a new inheritance. This inheritance is unlike any other inheritance in the world! First and foremost Peter is talking about God's promise to prepare and reserve an eternal home in Heaven for those who are in Christ. Before Jesus returned to Heaven, He spoke about this eternal inheritance with His disciples. He said in John 14:1, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's House are many rooms. If it were not so I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back to take you to be with me..." So this Eternal Inheritance that God has promised for everyone who is "in Christ" is unlike any other inheritance.

Example: Some time ago I saw a sticker on the back bumper of a brand new extravagant RV that said, "I am spending my children's inheritance." Well, you don't have to worry about this happening to your eternal inheritance. Nothing can touch our eternal treasure, nothing can tarnish it, no one can steal it, it can never be used up, nor is it subject to the stock market. Peter says it is being kept in heaven for you. In other words, no matter how long it takes for you to get to the end of your journey here on earth, Jesus is preparing and guarding your Eternal Home in Heaven, and it will be ready for you when you get there.

But I think there is something else that Peter means when he declares that in Christ God has given us a new inheritance. It also refers to all of the Heavenly resources and spiritual riches that belong to the Father. All of these riches have been made available to us in His Son right now. David put it this way in Psalm 23: 6—"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever."

Because we by God's mercy have become the adopted children of God, we have inherited all the privileges, resources and riches of heaven. And they are there for our use now. In other words, we don't have to wait until we die and go to heaven to draw upon these unlimited resources. We can draw on them today. When we lack strength, we can ask the God who is all powerful for His. When we lack peace, we can dip into His immeasurable ocean of peace. When we lack love, we can ask Him to fill us up with His unlimited love. When we lack wisdom, we can ask the one who is all knowing for His.

#3 In Christ He Has Given Us a New Protection. 1:5

The third gift of God's mercy is the gift of a new protection. Read verse 5. Not only is the believer's eternal inheritance kept safe in heaven, but so is the believer kept safe on earth by God's power all the way to the finish line. As a new believer I knew that God was preparing and reserving a place for me in heaven. But what I wasn't quite so sure about me. Would I be able to stand firm in the faith through all the problems and trials of life? Would I be able to withstand the powerful pull of the world and the enemy's temptations to remain in the faith all the way to the finish line, or would I fall away?

The truth is, if it were left up to us to keep us safe and secure in God's saving grace, we would never make it. We are no match for the world, the flesh and the Devil. But thank God it is not left up to us.

Peter says we are shielded by God's power until the coming of salvation!! What a promise! The word shield that Peter uses here is a military word meaning to guard, or to garrison against any and all attacks. It is a picture of God's omnipotent power encircling us like a fortress protecting us and keeping us safe all the way to the finish line—when we will be ushered into our Eternal Inheritance.

Scripture: What is fascinating to me is just how secure we are in Christ. We see this in John 10:27-28.

“My sheep hear my voice; I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.” Notice whose hands we are in? Jesus' hands. We are protected by the All Powerful hands of Jesus; and no one can snatch us out them. But that's not all; notice verse 29.

“My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.” Whose hands are we in according to this promise? The Father's hands; and no one can snatch us out of his hands! We are doubly protected by the hands of Jesus and the Hands of the Father. But wait; we aren't done. According to Ephesians 1:13-14 there's more!

“Having believed, you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of His glory.” In other words, the Holy Spirit lives in us to protect us and keep us safe all the way to the finish line, at which time we will be ushered into our eternal inheritance. God has given you and me a triple protection against the world, the flesh and the Devil! God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Example: Some where I read about one of God's fascinating creatures called the Diving Bell Spider. The Diving Bell Spider is found in Europe and Asia and has a God given protection mechanism that is pretty unique. When the spider becomes threatened by one of its enemies, it has the unique ability to form a bubble around itself and then dives to the bottom of a river or a lake. There beneath the surface of the water, this spider is kept safe and secure from the attacks of its enemies. It can remain there for hours, even days. When the coast is clear, the spider comes back up for more air! That is a tiny picture of the impenetrable bubble that God places around every believer. His hands, the hands of Jesus, and the indwelling Holy Spirit who lives inside of us serves as that bubble! Nothing can take us out of his hands, his kingdom, his family; nor take us away from His saving and keeping grace.

#4 In Christ He Has Given us a New Purpose. 1:6-7

But Peter has one more gift of God's mercy that we should study, and be thankful for when facing pain and problems. What is it? It is found in verses 6-7. For the believer, our problems serve a divine purpose.

Actually Peter teaches us several important lessons about problems in these 2 verses.

- First, in verse 6 Peter says our pain and problems are only temporary. He says in verse 6 *“...though now for a little while...”* Compared to our eternal inheritance in heaven our problems and pain are for a little while.

- Second, Peter also teaches us that problems and trials bring us grief. He says in verse 6 *“...though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.”* It is important for us to acknowledge that problems do cause us grief and distress. We must not sugar coat or deny our pain. It is real. But our pain and our problems do not define us—nor are they an end in themselves. They serve a divine purpose.
- For the redeemed of God; for the person who is in Christ, God has Divine Purposes for our pain, problems and even persecution. He promises to redeem even the negative things of our lives.

What are those purposes? There are several purposes that God’s word mentions; three of them are implied here.

The first divine purpose for problems is to strengthen our faith. Peter says in verse 7 *“These have come so that your faith...may be proved genuine.”* Faith is like a muscle and the more we exercise it the stronger it becomes. Every time we face a problem or a trial it is an opportunity to exercise our faith muscle. The more we do the stronger and more genuine our faith becomes.

The second purpose for our problems is so that our faith and character become purer. The Living Bible states it this way in verse 7: *“These trials are only to test your faith...it is being tested as fire tests gold and purifies it.”* Just like gold is heated and then the impurities float to the top and are skimmed off, so God uses trials and problems to skim away the impurities from our faith and produce Godly character in us. None of us like pain, but in the hands of the Master it produces good things.

The third divine purpose for our temporary problems and pain is to provide much praise and honor and glory for the precious Name of Jesus when He returns to claim His bride—the body of Christ. And the awesome thing about this honor and glory, is that we, you and I (the bride of Christ), will share in His glory.

Example: I like to go to the High School in Amery and look at all the trophies, plaques and pictures on display in the trophy case just outside the gymnasium. There are hundreds of them. Every trophy, every plaque, every picture is celebrating an accomplishment, a battle fought, and sometimes a championship won by a team of various athletes. They all serve one purpose: they are there to honor the name of Amery High School and all the students that participated in the sports all the students who graced the halls of Amery High School, and all the families of the community that help make it what it is.

Somewhere in Eternity, there is a trophy case. And in that eternal trophy case there will be trophies of God’s mercy. Not literal trophies and plaques. Rather it will be filled with the stories of imperfect sinners like you and me, who were transformed by the wonderful and marvelous Mercy of God, shown to us in Christ Jesus. So today, if you are facing a difficult problem, or severe pain, or even persecution—quit studying the problem and start studying the promises and the great mercy of God. If you do, He will guide you and give you the joy of His presence, even the midst of your suffering.