

This morning, we are in the sixth week of our sermon series through the New Testament book of 1 Peter, a letter written by the apostle Peter, one of the early church leaders, to a group of Christians scattered throughout Asia Minor, which is modern-day Turkey. I have entitled this sermon series “Stranger,” because one of the main themes throughout this letter is that those of us who believe in Jesus are citizens of heaven, living here as strangers or resident aliens. Our primary identity, values, and hope are not given to us by the culture in which we live but are found in heaven. The letter begins by focusing on who we are as believers in Jesus Christ, then moves on to a section on how we relate to each other in the church, and in the current section, Peter focuses on how we relate to the world. Let’s read 1 Peter 3:8-22:

1 Peter 3:8-22 - Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. ⁹ Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. ¹⁰ For, "Whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech. ¹¹ He must turn from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it. ¹² For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil." ¹³ Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? ¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened." ¹⁵ But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶ keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. ¹⁷ It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. ¹⁸ For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, ¹⁹ through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison ²⁰ who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, ²¹ and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also-- not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand-- with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

This is a great passage, but admittedly with a very confusing passage at the end about Jesus preaching to the spirits in prison. That’s not going to be the main focus of today’s message, but I want to quickly address it so that it does not distract from

the main point. The two leading schools of thought are that it is saying that Jesus preached by the Spirit through Noah to his community, which was opposed to him and ultimately experienced God's judgment, or that Jesus, after being raised from the dead, proclaimed victory over demonic spirits. Whatever it means, it's not the main point of this passage.

So, in the beginning of this passage, Peter encourages his listeners to treat each other with love, compassion, and humility, and to respond to evil with blessing and by doing good. And then in verses 15-16 he says this, which we will be focusing on this morning:

¹⁵ But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶ keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

I love that. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. It's not just "be ready to explain why you believe," but specifically to give a reason for the hope you have. Evidently, Peter is saying that there must be something unnatural about the hope that a Christian has, something unique about your perspective on life and the future that would cause others to become curious. He tells us to be ready to share what that hope is, and to do this with gentleness and respect and with a clear conscience, so that your message is not contradicted by your life and words.

Hope, Biblically speaking, is a confident expectation and desire for something good in the future. It's not just a desire or wish that something would happen, but an expectation. Think about the importance of hope and how critical it is to our lives. Tim Keller gives an illustration that I have found helpful – imagine two people working the same menial job for one year, but one is told they will be paid \$1/hour, and the other will be paid \$1 million/hour. One will think the job painful, while the other will see it as a breeze. The only difference in their circumstances is the expectation each has of what is to come.

It is easy to be hopeful when things are looking good. It is much harder when you are suffering, when you are a slave, when you are in a bad marriage, when you are persecuted. All of those situations were in the previous chapter. Is hope just an optimistic attitude, believing that "better days are coming!" Is it just a word of faith

belief that if I declare positive things, positive things will come my way? No – hope is a confident expectation based on something more certain than a wish.

Let me give the foundation for the hope that we have as believers that can empower us to face any circumstance of life.

¹⁸ For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, ¹⁹ through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison ²⁰ who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, ²¹ and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also-- not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand-- with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

Shares the gospel – our hope is because of the gospel of Jesus’ death for our sins and resurrection from the grave and ascension to the right hand of God, reigning over this world.

Because of this foundation, we have three reasons for hope, borrowing from a Jonathan Edwards sermon entitled Christian Happiness that he preached in 1721 at age 18: our bad things will turn out for our good, our good things will never be taken away, and the best is yet to come.

1) **Our bad things will turn out for our good**

How do you hold on to hope when life is terrible and there is no guarantee that things will turn around? When the marriage is terrible, when there is no hope for financial improvement, when your health is deteriorating? Peter writes this about the resurrected Jesus:

²² who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand-- with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

Jesus right now has authority over everything and everyone. The one who loved you so much that He gave His life for you is in control. He will not surrender you to the power of evil forces, even if your suffering ends in death. And so we can trust in Him. As Paul wrote:

Romans 8:28-29 - *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers*

This means that whatever is happening to me is not a random intrusion into my life, but is part of a story, and that God is taking everything bad and is working it together for good for good for those who love him, to make us more like Jesus. Even the death of a loved one or crippling illness can be used by God, if we submit to Him, to conform us to the image of His Son, as fatherly discipline to train us for greater godliness and joy.

This is real and certain hope. Think of the contrast this is to the prevailing narrative of our world. **Richard Schweder**, cultural anthropologist at the University of Chicago, writes “The reigning metaphor of the contemporary secular view is suffering is just chance misfortune. The sufferer is a victim under attack from impersonal forces devoid of intentionality, and that means suffering is separated from the narrative structure of human life, a kind of noise, an accidental interference, into the life drama of the sufferer.” In other words, suffering is not an integral part of a larger story of God making me like His Son, but an intrusion into the story I am trying to live.

But as we look at the cross, we see that even when it seems like God is absent or unloving, He is very much present, working all things for good. Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, we have hope that our bad things will turn out for good. Sometimes this happens as He uses our suffering to bring comfort and salvation to others.

2 Corinthians 1:3-7 - *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. ⁵ For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. ⁶ If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. ⁷ And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.*

In other words, sometimes the good that God brings out of suffering is that it equips us to bring life and encouragement to others who are suffering. Listen to

Viktor Frankl in *Man's Search for Meaning*, reflecting on a time when he was in the Nazi concentration camp and was particularly discouraged and how he got through it: "Suddenly I saw myself standing on the platform of a well-lit, warm and pleasant lecture room. In front of me sat an attentive audience on comfortable upholstered seats. I was giving a lecture on the psychology of the concentration camp! ... By this method I succeeded somehow in rising above the situation, above the sufferings of the moment." He found meaning in his suffering as he saw how it might be used to bring wisdom and help to others.

As Friedrich Nietzsche said, "He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how."

The first rock solid hope we have is that even the worst things Satan or this life throws at us can be used for our good, for our sanctification, or for the salvation and encouragement of others, if we would trust Him.

2) **Our good things can never be taken away from us:**

Without God, you may have good things, but how do you hold on to hope when you know that the good will not last. When every relationship will be ended by death? When health will fail? When your best days are behind you? One of the real challenges to having hope is recognizing that we will eventually lose everything that is meaningful to us. But that is not the case as a believer in Jesus.

As Tim Keller put it:

"If your ultimate love and joy is found in the treasures of this world, then suffering will rob you of your joy and make you sadder and madder. But if your ultimate love and joy is found in God, then suffering will drive you deeper into the source of that joy."

The Christian hope is that our good things can never be taken from us.

¹⁸ *For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.*

Jesus' death for our sins restores us to a right relationship with God. And now that we belong to Him, we can trust that all that is truly good will never be taken away.

1 Peter 1:3-5 - Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade-- kept in heaven for you, ⁵ 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.

All that is ours is kept in heaven, safeguarded for us. The love of God, that which our hearts have been longing for but looking to other things to give us, can never be taken away:

Romans 8:35-39 - Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ³⁶ As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." ³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And as we serve Him, we are storing up treasure in heaven

This world is wasting away. Your health, your looks, your relationships, your status, are all going to eventually fade or die away. But the good things we have in Jesus will never be taken away from us. That is why Jesus says:

Matthew 6:19-21 - "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

And so we can give ourselves fully to the work God has for us, knowing that it is never lost:

1 Corinthians 15:57-58 - Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Do you know what that does, knowing that every single thing we do for the Lord matters eternally? That is a certain hope!

3) **The best is yet to come**

Death is not the end. The best this world has to offer is nothing compared to what is ahead. And that is our ultimate hope.

It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand-- with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

Because He is risen, all who belong to Him will rise again.

John 11:25-26 - Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; ²⁶ and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

The Biblical writers grasp for language to describe what it will be like on that day. Revelation talks about no more suffering, seeing God, healing, intimacy. It uses marriage imagery – like a bride beautifully prepared for her husband. Marriage supper of the lamb. Streets of gold. Beauty. Intimacy.

1 Corinthians 2:9 - However, as it is written: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him"--

Romans 8:18 - I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

This is the ultimate hope we have, that in the light of eternity our sufferings will fade, that the sufferings we experience in this world would only enhance our joy on that day. All that you thought you had lost will be yours forever – the beauty, the intimacy, the health, the significance, the love, the peace, the joy. All of it will be yours forever. This is why Paul can write:

Philippians 1:21 - For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Death can not kill us, but only give us life to the fullest. Think of the words of DL Moody – "Soon you will read in the newspaper that I am dead. Don't believe it for a moment. I will be more alive than ever before."

I love how this exposes "best life now" theology that tries to convince us that if we just keep a positive attitude, God will give us prosperity and blessing here on earth.

Peter does not teach that. He tells them us that you may always be a slave. You may always be in a bad marriage. You may suffer and be persecuted until you die. But your hope is not in the things of this world. It is not in getting a promotion or in your marriage getting turned around or your health improving. Your hope is in Jesus, dying for our sins, rising from the dead. Your hope is in all that He has in store for you forever. This is a hope that the suffering of this world can not take away.

And so, if you are in a bad marriage, your hope is not that your spouse will die or that maybe one day it will get better. Your hope is in knowing that whether or not it turns around, God is at work, always working for your good, to conform you to the image of your Son. God will use your situation to equip you to minister to others. You know that what your heart is truly longing for, the love, the security, the joy, the intimacy – is truly found in a relationship with God, and that nothing will ever take that away from you. And you know that whatever your relationship is like, the best is yet to come.

If your work and career have not gone as hoped, your hope is not in getting that promotion, or that one day you will be doing what your heart desires. Your hope is in knowing that whatever happens, your identity is not in what you do but in who you are, and that God is working for your good wherever you are, equipping you for ministry to others. You know that the meaning and purpose your heart longs for is found in knowing and serving Him, and that the best is yet to come, that when you are with Him, you will reign with Him over the new creation in a way that fulfills your deepest longings.

If your health is gone and not coming back, your hope is not that some day it miraculously turns around. Your hope is that whatever happens, God is still working in you for your good, conforming you to the image of His Son as you trust in Him, using your situation to equip you to minister to others. All that is good will be yours forever, and perfect health will be yours forever where there is no more suffering or pain or death. Whatever painful life situation you are in, if your hope is not in this world but in Him, then even the worst experiences will only drive you deeper into Him, into the source of your hope and joy.

Quickly, how does this hope change our relationships to others?

1) We can love without neediness

Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. ⁹ Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.

When our hope is in Christ, we can love without neediness. Our love does not depend upon whether or not someone else loves us. I don't love because you love me first. I love because He loved me first. He fills me up and allows me to love you, even if you mistreat me. I can even return good for evil because He was good to me when I was evil.

2) We can love without fear

¹³ Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? ¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened."

We can love, even when we suffer. If the one whose opinion matters more than anyone else has declared me perfect and nothing can take away his love, then what can man do to me?

Romans 8:31-34 - *What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? ³³ Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died-- more than that, who was raised to life-- is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.*

Our hope is a confident expectation and desire for something good in the future. We have an unshakable hope because our bad things will work out for good, our good things can never be taken away from us, and the best is yet to come. Put your hope in Jesus today!