

## Continuing to Hope in God

### 1 Peter 1:13-25

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13 Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 14 As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, 15 but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, 16 since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." 17 And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, 18 knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.

20 He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for your sake, 21 who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

22 Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, 23 since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; 24 for

"All flesh is like grass

and all its glory like the flower of grass.

The grass withers,

and the flower falls,

25 but the word of the Lord remains forever."

And this word is the good news that was preached to you.

After describing in the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter what Christians *are*, Peter in this text now moves on to discuss how they should live. In essence, there are 4 exhortations:

*...set your hope fully on the grace that...*

*...be holy in all your conduct*

*...conduct yourselves with fear*

*and:...love one another earnestly from a pure heart*

I will show under 3 headings that Christians must derive their hope from the resurrection of Jesus, and why such hope is diametrically opposed to religion, but essential for genuine holiness. Therefore, my title is:

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*Everybody* in pursuit of happiness must hope in SOMETHING. Bombarded by TV ads, you may *think* that we should all hope to find pleasure, wealth and health, a perfect mate, a job that provides for our needs, and respect from other people, for example. Or maybe some of you hope for glory. The point is that all of us still hope in *something*.

For “*Everything that is done in the world is done by hope*”, as Martin Luther said. And: *To live without hope is to cease to live (Dostoevsky)*.

So What *are* you hoping for ? What are the hopes that fuel *your* current activities?

1) Our text first calls the Christian to hope fully and perfectly on God’s grace. In a very long Greek sentence, we have here embedded what is really the first imperative of this letter: Therefore...hope perfectly upon the grace that is being brought to you in the revelation of Jesus Christ. The remaining words are qualifiers describing the people to whom this exhortation is addressed: having girded up the loins of your mind, i.e. ready to use your brains, being sober-minded, and “*as obedient children, not conforming to the desires you had when you were still ignorant*” of Christian doctrine.

Let’s think then first what was the foundation of their hope. Peter starts with a “therefore”, which must refer to the first section. There he put on record why Christians were so excited about God. Recalling what happened, he compares their conversion experience to a second birth into a new life. A life marked by a living new hope, which empowered these believers to crush their fears, selfishness, hatred, and to endure every kind of hardship and trials without retaliation. Where did this powerful new hope come from?

The answer is in v3: *According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...* The living hope of believers comes from the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Even though the recipients of this letter themselves had not seen the risen Jesus, their hope too was based on the resurrection. - Why would it make a difference if Jesus had not been raised from the dead? Here is why: If there was no resurrection of Jesus, there is no sound reason for hope at all to cope with a brutally merciless universe.

1. The hope of *Christians is unique because it is founded on faith in the bodily resurrection of Jesus*. If you have no hope for our condition, or if you feel like loosing hope in the midst of your trials and temptations, direct your mind to the accounts of the resurrection of Jesus and their implication. Let it dawn on you how this life with its trials derives its importance from the fact that the true life is yet to come. Unless faith is built on that foundation, our hope will not have the power to bear a cross – the cross of real hardship and trials that we face while we live in this world in “exile”, as Peter puts it.

But some of you will probably object: “Can we still believe in a bodily resurrection? Isn’t such faith outdated, a relic of superstitious, pre-enlightenment tribes?” The flaw in this objection, in my view, is the unfounded assumption that

ancient people were more naïve, and that they accepted the resurrection story because they were superstitious. Remember, what was the response when the apostle Paul spoke of the bodily resurrection of Jesus to the people in Athens? *When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked (Acts 17:32)*. And when Paul spoke about the resurrection to king Agrippa and the Roman governor Festus, *“Festus interrupted Paul’s defense. ‘You are out of your mind, Paul!’ he shouted” (Acts 26:24)*. So don’t believe for a moment that people back then uncritically accepted the resurrection because they were just naïve. For them, it was just as incredible as it is for people today. Why else would the general sentiment have been so hostile to the gospel to even launch systematic persecution? - Since nobody easily believes in accounts of a bodily resurrection, how could the early Christians reach a general consensus on such an idea if it had been fabricated? And why would they have fabricated it in the first place, if one considers that this story naturally was bound to be a major stumbling block for most, if not all, people? If the church is about controlling and exploiting the masses, why would they freely choose to put at the center of their message a resurrection story that is virtually impossible to swallow? It just makes no sense whatsoever as a business strategy. Against all those odds, the church maintained the bodily resurrection as a central article of faith, and numerous people from all walks of life accepted this faith and became sincere Christians, usually at the cost of violent persecution. Why? - I think we are left with only one plausible explanation: That the testimony of the living eye witnesses must have been extremely compelling!

2) Now this brings me to my second point, namely that:

*Hope inspired by the resurrection spells the end of religion.*

To explain this, let me define what I mean by religion. Religion comprises all systems conceived to somehow *purchase* the favor of the Gods (or of fate) by the merits of our own sacrifices of virtue, self-restraint, charity - you name it. There are countless versions of it. The basic concept is illustrated in the Bible already by the book of Genesis with the ancient story of Cain: How he wished to appease God with the fruits of his own labor. By contrast, saving faith in the crucified and risen Christ as we see it in Cain’s younger brother Abel condemns all such efforts. Abel acknowledged that only an unblemished substitute is sufficient to avert God’s vengeance, and that therefore salvation can only come through a savior outside himself. He boldly hoped that God would be gracious enough to count him among the righteous - when seeing the spotless lamb, a symbol of the one unblemished substitute to come, Jesus. Unlike religion, Abel’s faith thus required him to set his hope entirely on God’s free *grace* from beginning to end.

Now, the Bible openly acknowledges that we can make a mess of these things if we twist their original meaning and purpose. Therefore, Peter urges his readers to be sober-minded: *“Having girded up the loins of your mind, being sober...”*. We need sound theology that firmly fixes our hope for salvation on God’s *grace alone*: Hope fully in the *grace* that is being brought to you in the revelation of Jesus Christ. But didn’t the recipients of this letter already have such hope? Yes. So is Peter simply calling here for *more* of the same? No, I don’t think so. So what is he after? I think the best translation here is: *“Hope to the end...”*. To remain in Christ,

we must *continue* to fix our hope *all to the end* on grace alone. Or, as Paul put it in the letter to the Colossians: To be reconciled, holy, above reproach and blameless before God, we need to “...*continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard,...*” (Col 1:23). Know this hope, and guard against the constant pull to rely on yourself as Cain did in his futile worship. In fact, the vision statement of our church “rooted in the gospel – radical transformation” - wants to remind us of exactly that. We expect that true revival happens when our hope is set on God’s grace as revealed in the gospel.

So what does it mean to hope in God’s *grace*? How is that done? The answer is: By *knowing that you were ransomed by the blood of Christ* (v18). Believing the gospel, we *know* that the penalty for all our acts of unrighteousness has been paid by God himself – paid in full – so that we can freely enter into His presence and enjoy its benefits! No religion *ever* offered a remotely similar hope! But how was this payment made for you and me? Here is how: In Jesus, a man without blemish, God offered himself as a perfect substitute to suffer the condemnation that we deserved. Sounds incredible? Yes indeed! But to overcome unbelief, all this happened in accordance with undisputable ancient predictions. These predictions prove that Jesus was *not* just God’s “plan B”. He was “*foreknown before the foundation of the world*”, v20. He fulfilled what previously had been long foreshadowed in the form of ceremonial animal sacrifices, repeated again and again since the time of Abel until the death of Jesus. Sure, I don’t question that at some times such rituals were performed blindly. But at all times, they were a powerful metaphor that our redemption indeed requires a better substitute than animals to make good for our sins.

Ok, we have been talking so far about the foundation of Christian hope. But how can such hope of forgiveness and acceptance be *yours*?

If we read Peter, it’s clear that something has to happen in us. It requires a change of heart around which there is simply no shortcut.

This brings me to my third and last point, namely that:

3) Hope calls on God as a “father of obedient children”.

We see this in verse 14: “...*as obedient children, not conforming to the passions of your former ignorance*”; and in verse 17: “*If you call on him as father...*”. The reality is, we can only have living hope in God if we really are his children. We become his children by faith: By trusting that Jesus is what he claimed to be, that he - and he *alone* - is sufficient to make us right and more than acceptable to God. This is not just something you sign on a paper. It can’t be done through a church membership or a subscription. No! It involves your mind, your soul, your heart. *Therefore*, whoever believes and confesses Jesus as Lord according to the Bible becomes like a temple – a house of worship where God himself takes permanent residence by his own Spirit. This happens *inside*.

But on the outside, faith also joins you to the community of “obedient children of God” who call on God as their *Father* - trusting in a loving God, gladly obeying him and his call on our lives. What greater hope can there be but that God himself is dwelling in you? To make the heart firm by softening it? To awaken true love of

God to leave an indelible mark on your daily walk and lifestyle? For this we meet here today: To praise God that such renewal has already begun here in this world, sometimes in unexpected sweeping revivals, sometimes quietly at the fringes of society.

*Calling* on God as a father: This means, hope in God leads to *worship*. It means to pray and work with much care and sorrow, preparing the way so that genuine heart renewal overcomes all present imperfections. - But our hope reaches even farther than this, as we eagerly expect a day when undeserved grace will *perfectly* rule every heart and thereby eradicate all evil from the face of the earth at the final return of Jesus Christ.

But wait a minute! Does Peter's call to *obedience* not flatly contradict the idea that we should put our hope in God's *unmerited* favor? Is Peter perhaps rendering only lip service to grace, if already in the following sentence he quotes from the Mosaic law in the OT book Leviticus that we must be holy in all behavior as God himself is holy, v15? And if he preaches that we must fear this father as an impartial judge of all of our deeds, v17? Doesn't such language promote the very opposite of grace, namely self-righteousness and pride in the merits of works of obedience?

Before addressing this question, let's be clear: Whether we like it or not, the Bible everywhere demands no less than *perfect* obedience. Nowhere does it offer even the slightest hope that anyone can find God's approval by being "a good citizen" with less than a 100% score. The first of the 10 commandments is to *love* God with *all* our heart and all our soul. Breaking this or any other law means to be guilty of all. So let's not deceive ourselves by thinking that *any* of our sins are harmless, and that God can possibly overlook and cancel our debt just like that (*snap*)! To do that, he would have to cease to be God. ALL people, if they have any light at all, have always recognized THAT. That is why the Christian both loves *and* fears God -not with a slavish fear that wants to run away from God and keep him at a distance, but with awe and proper respect. For we know that a loving God will visit his *disobedient* children - not for vengeance, but for *correction* - using sometimes rather painful *measures*.

However, it would be wrong to think that Peter is contradicting himself, or that he is mixing up grace and law here. Literal translations make this point clear when they state: Hope to the end on the grace... "as obedient children..." Even as, *especially* as obedient children, who are no longer enslaved by unlawful desires, they must now be even more vigilant to resist the evil trap of self-righteousness. - Remember Jesus' parable of the prodigal son? It was the *older* brother who was hopeless. The *older* brother even *complained* about his father's grace! Because he wished that his father instead would favor *him* over his licentious sibling, as a reward for the merits of his obedience and service. - Cain was such an older brother. *He* only entertained false and empty hopes with no power to restore him to either his father or his brother. And, of course, he was quite mistaken to consider himself superior to his brother.

To properly understand the call to be holy as God is holy, we must read it in its context. Literally, this command is issued several times in Leviticus.e.g in 11:45: *For I am the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You*

*shall therefore be holy, for I am holy (Leviticus 11:45). And in Leviticus 20, v26: You shall be holy to me, for I the Lord am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine (Leviticus 20:26).* In these and similar passages, “holy” means to be set apart to serve God by living according to his commandments. So how then can we be holy “as God is holy”? -

Here is an important mystery! In fact, in Hebrew the present commandment is equally a promise: “You shall *and will* be holy as I am holy”. That is why these passages also refer to the redemption of Israel from slavery in Egypt. It is as if God were saying: “Just as my own saving arm redeemed you from that slavery, so it will also fulfil the demands for holiness in you. Don’t give up the good fight to live consistent with your high calling! *There is great hope* for you, for I the great I am, I am your redeemer”. That this is exactly what the author had in his mind is also plainly evident in Leviticus 20:7, which states: *Keep my decrees and follow them. I am the Lord who makes you holy (Lev 20:7);* and again: *I am the Lord who makes them holy (Lev 22:16);* and again: *I must be acknowledged as holy by the Israelites. I am the Lord who makes you holy (Leviticus 22:32).* - Given this context, it makes perfect sense, therefore, that Peter quotes Leviticus to show that the Christian depends on grace from beginning to end! For this is our hope: That God himself *will even make us holy!* Although it costs all *our* effort too – and let me be clear: it does cost all our effort too! - our striving for holiness and any true victories in that battle are ultimately of God. It is absolutely crucial to understand this. For if we don’t get it, we are bound to become self-righteous hypocrites, not Christians. According to v21, not even *faith* in God springs from any good spark in and of ourselves, but is created in us by God through the redeeming work of Jesus. Listen what Peter has to say about this: “Through *Him* you believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and glorified *Him*, and so your faith *and* hope are in God” (1 Pet 1:21, NIV).

And look at V22: “*Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart*”: Such true hope in grace is also God’s medicine to purify our disposition towards fellow men! For only when we hope in God’s *grace* alone, all occasions to boast in ourselves are abolished, and we will stop feeling superior over “younger brothers”.

To close full circle: From beginning to the end, we must fasten our faith and hope in *God*, by recognizing and acknowledging that his immeasurable blessing and favor are bestowed on as a *gift*. Not because we deserve it, but because of the abundant goodness and holiness of God himself as revealed in Jesus.