

### **Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!**

I am happy... thrilled... to be standing before you right now preaching. And I'm not the only pastor that feels that way this morning. Ask any pastor, "When do you enjoy preaching the most?" and you inevitably hear one of two answers: Some will say "Easter." Others may say, "Funerals." But when you get right down to it, funeral sermons are simply Easter sermons preached during the other part of the year. Why do we love to preach on Easter? Or better put, why do we so love to preach about the resurrection of Christ? There is nothing else in all the world that gives living hope to God's people like the good news about Jesus' resurrection. It's fun share good news. More than that, it's vital for us to know and believe this good news.

Today we consider some very comforting words from our God recorded in 1 Peter 1:3-9. These words were written to some people who really needed living hope. One of Jesus' disciples, Peter, wrote a letter to some believers living in Asia Minor - modern day western Turkey. Our best guess is that he wrote the letter more than 30 years after Jesus had risen and ascended into heaven. So this is getting toward the end of Peter's life.

The Christians who first received this letter were going through a really rough time. They were being persecuted for their faith in Christ. They were suffering. Daily life for them was a great struggle... not at all fun. In fact, for some of them, this was now their second persecution. Some in this area *had* been in Jerusalem, and a part of the church that sprung up there at Pentecost. But a persecution there from the Jews led some of them to flee to Asia Minor. And now it was starting all over again... this time persecution not from the Jews, but from the unbelievers around them. Can you imagine how they were feeling? Not only had their daily life *not* gotten easier as Christians, it had actually gotten considerably worse... directly because they *were* Christians. They were losing hope. They were getting discouraged. And so Peter wrote this letter to them to encourage them. He wanted to tell them. "Life isn't hopeless! You have a lasting, living hope because we have a risen Lord Jesus. Listen to what he wrote:

**1 Peter 1:3-9 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, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, 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. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.**

These words that God gave to Peter for those struggling Christians give us hope today as well. Now in all honesty, we simply do not have it as bad as those Christians had it in Asia Minor. We have a tremendous blessing from God in that we can gather and worship without persecution here in the United States. And yet, even with that freedom, there is still real persecution we must endure. Have you ever *not* witnessed about Jesus when you had an

opportunity? Can I ask you... what held you back? Wasn't it fear of some sort of persecution? Being labeled as a Jesus freak or a religious nut? Fear that people's opinion of you might change if you spoke up about Christ. Now I wish I could say there was no reason to feel that way, but the truth is that Christianity is most definitely persecuted in America today. Not, for the most part, a physical persecution, but most certainly a psychological or emotional or social persecution.

If you are facing it, it's discouraging. It's enough to make you lose hope, just as the people in Asia Minor were discouraged and losing hope. And besides persecution for our faith, you can also be sure that Satan is sending all sorts of other challenges and difficulty and suffering your way to make you second guess God's love for you. Difficulty making ends meet. Health challenges. Broken relationships. Job insecurity. You name... any and all of these things can create doubt instead of hope.

Friends, on this day of Christ's resurrection, your Lord God is promising you that no matter what circumstances you are facing in life, you have a sure and living hope. Now, when God promises a sure and living hope, our suffering and our circumstances cause us to doubt it, just as with the Asia Minor Christians. 5 questions of doubt may enter our minds in time of suffering. We'll look at them one at a time and we'll see God's answer to the question.

- 1) **“Is this living hope real and is it for ME?”** More and more, atheists are becoming bold in putting down Christians. If you haven't heard, you will hear them say, “I don't need Jesus. He's a crutch for the weak. I don't need a crutch... I can walk on my own.” They're saying the living hope we have in Christ is not real. It just gets us through the bad times.

We might be tempted to ask, Is the hope we have in Christ real? I mean the promise is nothing but incredible! Paul said, **“In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope... an inheritance that will never fade.”** God promises us eternal life with him forever! Amazing. But is it real? We know it is... because God did these things for us in actual human history that we can study and trace. So, yes, it's historically true.

But is this living hope FOR ME? We're tempted to doubt this because we know our own lives... our own sins, don't we? We know the wrong, hurtful things we've said to those who are closest to us. Isn't it amazing how we can be so cordial with strangers, and downright nasty to those who live under the same roof with us? We know the wrong things we've done. And we know what no one else but God knows, and this is the wrong thoughts, desires, and lusts of our mind. And so we ask: “Would God really forgive me? Can he really take my guilt away? Would he love... even me?”

The answer to this question is answered resoundingly at the empty tomb of Christ. You see God's love was so great, he sent his Son to live for you that right and perfect life God required you to live. He sent his Son to die that horrific death for your wrongs that you deserved. Well... at least that's what Jesus said! But did he really lay down his life... for me? Was it enough? Is his forgiveness complete? Is the hope of heaven real?

The empty tomb which we celebrate this Easter morning is the resounding, **“YES!”** Christ is risen, so he is who he said he is... the Son of God made flesh. His teaching was all true. His sacrifice for our wrongs was complete. And his resurrection means we will rise and live eternally with our God in heaven! Is this living hope real? Yes it is!

- 2) **“Is it worth it?”** This is what the Asia Minor Christians were asking. We're suffering BECAUSE we trust in Christ. It would be so much easier if we would renounce this faith

and live like our neighbors. Is it worth it to suffer this way?

I think most of you know that chemotherapy... a common treatment for many forms of cancer... is actually a poison. It's a poison administered in controlled doses in the hopes that the rapidly reproducing cancer cells might be killed. And often it works. But as that poison is administered, the patient suffers. Nausea, hair loss, pain... and more. But ask the cancer patient in remission... "was it worth it" and they would say, "Without a doubt!"

Friends this world brings suffering and persecution to us Christians. Satan tries to destroy our hope. And we sometimes ask, Is it worth it? The answer is: without a doubt. This life is so short. Ask anyone who is in the latter years of life how fast it's gone by. And the things of this world are so temporary. The new car is pretty worn out and rusty 10 years later. The new cutting edge laptop or cell phone is already hopelessly outdated one... maybe two... weeks later. This life and the wealthy of this world are definitely not worth it. But what follows is eternity... forever. in heaven... with God, the source of all that is good... no pain... no need... no suffering... no death. An inheritance that never dies and never ends; can never get dirty, tarnished, or out dated or messed up by sin; an inheritance that forever maintains its greatness and brilliance. The very salvation of your tormented soul is what we're talking about. So the answer to question 2: Is it worth it? Oh, yes!

- 3) **"Might it be taken from me?"** Maybe I can lose. Maybe I already lost it since God is treating me like this. People lose earthly treasures all the time... through accident, through carelessness, through disasters, because of the evil intent of some. But God's gift is not like this. Two reasons you won't lose this gift. (1) God gave it. (2) God guards it. Listen to this: **In his great mercy he has given us** this inheritance. It's God who gives it, and God does not take back what he gives. And God gave it unconditionally simply because of his great mercy. The reason he gave was not because of the good he sees in us, but because of the love he finds in himself. Since the gift depends only on God, and God is unchanging, the gift is always good... always secure.

Plus we have this reassurance: Your inheritance is **"kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation."** You are being guarded by the power of God almighty. By faith you are found inside his shield which completely surrounds you, and no one and nothing can penetrate it. God's guarantee about heaven is this: a) He gave it, so there is no doubt. b) you're going to get there. And c) when you get there, heaven will be there. Might it be taken from me? Not a chance?

- 4) **"So what about now...** before "then." Then, I will have everything. And now I have nothing. Is that it?

Absolutely not. Even though the inheritance is not yet yours, you possess something that the unbelievers of this world do not have and envy more than anything else. You have great, inexpressible, glorious joy... you can rejoice in this life right now, in spite of whatever suffering or challenges or heart ache you may have to face.

My dad liked to say, "Mama ain't happy, ain't nobody happy." He knew that if my mother was happy, the rest of the members of our family would be happy too. Now apply that in your relationship with God. If God ain't happy with you, ain't no way you're gonna be happy. But we've already seen today that because Christ, who took our sin and guilt upon him, rose from the dead, we have proof positive that our sins are forgiven. And

if our sins are forgiven, God looks at us and he sees holy, perfect children. And when God sees that, God is happy. And if God is happy, that means we're happy. You see, God in his love and patience is putting up with the sin, evil and wickedness of this world for a while...giving people time to know him and his love. And he asks that we be patient too. So whatever we suffer in a wicked world, we can still be happy. We can still rejoice, for we know that our God rejoices over us for the sake of our Savior.

So what about now? We have nothing? Wrong! We have inexpressible, glorious joy, peace, and comfort. We're right with God... so we're happy.

- 5) Final question: **“But why the suffering”** . Why doesn't God just take care of it? Why doesn't he just make it go away? While God doesn't typically reveal specifics to us, this Bible text does reveal a generality. Your faith is your most precious possession. Your trust in Jesus Christ as your one and only and complete Savior from sin, your free ticket to heaven, is the most valuable thing you possess. Therefore, whatever happens in your life that strengthens your faith, is good and is a blessing. And truth is, testing and trials show the genuineness of our faith. Fake faith burns up when the heat is turned on. A real faith in Christ is refined and purified when in the heat. Adversity and difficulties are when we really put our faith into practice and exercise. Exercise makes it strong. And a strong faith grasps hold of God's promises in Christ Jesus.

Take a look at the greatest men and women of faith in history, and you'll find individuals who went through many trials and adversities. Study the lives of the most prolific hymn writers in our hymnal, and you'll find lives filled with adversity and suffering. Faith is strengthened and purified this way. Faith is our most valuable possession. That makes suffering a blessing from God.

Conclusion: Friends, the easy life in this world is nothing more than cotton candy. It looks big. It tastes good for a moment. But it's nothing but fluff. It dissolves in an instant. And it has not nutritional value. God's not feeding you cotton candy. He's feeding you a steak dinner. And what we suffer in this life just make us all the hungrier for it.

Someone once said that living our life with the risen Christ gives endless hope. Living without him gives hopeless end. Friends, believe this three-fold Christ died... for you. Christ has risen... for you. Christ will come again... for you. This is our living hope and our inexpressible and glorious joy! Christ is risen. He is risen indeed! Amen.