

Opening song: The Power of the Cross

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The Heidelberg Catechism asks the pointed question, “*What is our only hope in life and death?*” What is our sure comfort, our only comfort in life and death? Perhaps that is the most important question you and I can pose to each other – and I am reminded that the Westminster Catechism begins with that haunting question, “*What is our chief end?*” And the response is, our chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. And so I want to remind you this morning folk, that both the Westminster Catechism as well as the Heidelberg Catechism points to the passage that I want to draw your attention to this morning. It’s found in 1 Peter, and we read selected verses from verse 3 to verse 9, and then from verse 13 to the end of the chapter:

“³ 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. This inheritance is 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. ⁶ In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷ These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸ 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, ⁹ for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

¹³ Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming. ¹⁴ As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. ¹⁵ But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; ¹⁶ for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.” ¹⁷ Since you call on a Father who judges each person’s work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear. ¹⁸ For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. ²⁰ He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. ²¹ Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.

²² Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart. ²³ For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. ²⁴ For,

“All people are like grass,

and all their glory is like the flowers of the field;

the grass withers and the flowers fall,

²⁵ but the word of the Lord endures forever.”

And this is the word that was preached to you.

Albert Einstein was right - in every crisis there is great opportunity. And when we reflect on the situation that confronts us here not only in South Africa, but throughout the length and breadth of the world, the Covid-19 pandemic has caused great fear in many hearts, but it's also an opportunity for you and me to reflect on those things which are Important. The pandemic reminds us that we're not in control of things as we thought we were. The poem, *Invictus*, reminds us and suggests that we are captains of our soul, masters of our own destiny, but we've been humbled to think that for all our vaunted technology and advancement of science, and having discovered the mysteries of outer space, still the longing of the human heart is to find comfort in the midst of adversity. And it is this theme that Peter addresses in the marvellous letter.

He's speaking to believers, both Greeks and Jewish people, Christians and Gentiles, who've come to faith in the Living God. And it's very interesting that Peter having introduced his letter in a Trinitarian form, focuses the attention of the hearts and minds of his readers upon Jesus. He gives thanks to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who, in His great mercy, has given us new birth, into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the Dead.

Now surely Peter, having witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus, and realised that the centre of our faith is the cross, why then does he focus our hearts and minds upon the resurrection? Well you'll recall that in the hours of darkness shortly before His trial and ultimate crucifixion, Peter denied his saviour and his master three times. And he went out into the darkness of night and wept bitterly. The cross in that context did not make sense to Peter. It was the end of his hopes and dreams, in actual fact, his faith laid like cold ashes, and he was bereft of all comfort.

Fast forward several days, having witnessed the empty tomb, still, the folded grave clothes did not make sense to Peter, and he had returned to the one vocation that made sense for him. Having failed to be a fisher of men as Christ had called him to be, he felt that he could return to his vocation as a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee. Even then, having fished all night, they caught nothing. And then a figure on the shore told them to cast their nets on the other side and as they did so, they hauled in a catch that almost caused their nets to break. Peter realised, in a flash, that that figure was indeed the Risen Christ. Before the boat had reached the shore he bounded out into the lapping waves and fell at the feet of Christ. And then, having had breakfast, Jesus posed three poignant questions to Peter: *Peter, do you love me more than these* – was He referring to his fellow disciples, a catch of fish, we're not sure. Do you love me more than these? Peter was hurt, he said, Lord, you know all things, you know I love you. Feed my sheep, said Jesus. A second time, *do you love me?* Take care of my flock. And then the third, *Peter, do you love me?* Feed my sheep. And this is what Peter is doing in this passage – He is feeding people who feel somewhat disheartened and dislocated. What does he do? He doesn't ignore the cross – he will come to that. We saw he uses a wonderful metaphor that comes from the market place, the metaphor of redemption. And no one metaphor will adequately describe the mystery of the atonement. Theologians can speak about theories of the atonement, but this is not a theory – it is reality. Peter knew in the depths of his heart, left to himself, he was not only bereft, he was lost. But Christ came and purchased him at great cost, not with gold and jewels, but with the precious blood of Christ.

Lincon reminded us last Sunday about the mystery and marvel of the sacrificial system of the Old Testament, that there was no forgiveness, and even then, when a Jewish believe came on the day of atonement and provision was made for the sin of the community – deep within his heart, he knew that there needed to be more than simply the blood of goats and animals and bulls. That's why Peter's faith was restored when the Risen Christ embraced him. And notice what he says: we've been given a new birth. Remembering when Nicodemus, a Jewish leader, came to Jesus at night – Peter recalled those words, *Nicodemus, unless you are born again, born from above, you shall not enter the kingdom of Heaven*. Peter reflects on those words here and he echoes the words of Jesus, in His great mercy, that is, the Father's, He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. But more than that, He's given us an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you.

Faith by its very nature looks back to the cross of Calvary. But here, Peter is using the metaphor of hope. And hope and faith are intertwined, in fact, when we look at a further passage in Peter's letter, he says, *always be prepared to give an answer to every who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have*. What is that hope? It's grounded in faith in Christ. This hope is more than wishful thinking, more than pious belief that things somehow will turn out better – no, it is grounded in the resurrection of Jesus.

At this point, let me pose the question: What does Peter mean when he speaks about, *in His great mercy, God, in Christ, has given us new birth*? When we speak about mercy, we invariably think about compassion for someone who doesn't deserve it. For example, when someone, the accused in the dock throws himself upon the mercy of the court, he's appealing to the judge not to sentence him with the mandatory sentence. But he appeals to his mercy, to view extenuating circumstances so that the sentence will be less harsh. That's one aspect of mercy – compassion for those who don't deserve it. In that sense, God is utterly merciful. Yet there is another sense of this word which goes far deeper than simply compassion. It's the Old Testament word for *chesed* – grace; mercy. I would suggest that Peter is reflecting not simply upon mercy for those who don't deserve it, but he is appealing to the character of God when the children of Israel, in their defiance against the Holy character of God, worshipped the idol that was erected for them, and they broke the second commandment. And Moses, in his anger, took the two stone tablets on which the Law of God was written and he smashed them into the ground. And then God in His mercy, rewrote the Law and Moses descended from the mount once more, and presented this gift of severe mercy to the people and he appealed to the fact that God is compassionate, righteous, longsuffering.

It's this theme of the character of God, which is consistent and true, that He remains faithful even when His people are faithless, that Peter refers and underscores this morning. That's the first point that Peter makes – we've been given new birth into a living hope.

In the later part of this passage, Peter once again uses this metaphor of the new birth, having encouraged his readers, and by implication us, to love one another deeply from the heart. Why do we do that? Peter says the following, *for you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God*. There we have it! In black and white. The word of God, the scripture of the Old and New testament that the writer of the Hebrews describes as a surgeon's scalpel,

which hurts in order to heal, bringing hope after conviction of sin, comfort and challenge. The living word of God.

When the so called eternal city of Rome fell like a pack of cards, before the invading hordes under Alaric, and they laid waste to the city, the Christians were blamed because in the public eye, they were unfaithful to the pantheon of Roman gods, they were not authentic citizens. It was left to Augustine, that great saint of Africa, to write possibly his greatest work, *The City of God*, and he reminds us through the writer of the Hebrews, that we have received a kingdom that cannot be shaken. And how do we know that this is true? Yes, we have the witness of the Spirit, as Peter says, through the resurrection of Christ, but more than that, we have an objective reference which is outside of us, namely, the Word of God inspired by the Holy Spirit. And Augustine was quite right when he wrote, *what the Bible says, God says...* and we have assurance of this certain word from God, reminding us that those events that happened two thousand years ago are not confined to the pages of history, but the living Christ is with us, the Risen Christ, here to give us not only a hope... I'm reminded of the words of Charles Dickens, who spoke about hope as heavens gift to struggling mortals, more infectious than any disease, more infectious than Covid-19 - Yes, if we understand the authentic meaning of hope as Peter described it for us in this passage. Hope grounded in the resurrection of Jesus, hope grounded in the assurance of eternal life, hope grounded in the witness of scripture.

And so, dear friends, as I conclude this morning, I'm reminded of the words that Richard Baxter wrote in his book, *the Believers Everlasting Rest* – and he concludes that work with these words: *Christ knows all things and I am His*. In the midst of this pandemic, in the midst of a society which is becoming increasingly polarized, where so often toxic tweets pass for national discourse today, I'm reminded of these great words of Peter, *"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."*

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Song of praise: Christ our Hope in Life and Death

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