

Rejoicing Saints, Inquiring Prophets, and Longing Angels

Text: 1 Peter 1:3-12

Easter 2010

In this passage the apostle Peter calls his readers' attention to the great and glorious salvation that has been given us in Christ Jesus.

He begins with a doxology. His mind is so taken up, so consumed, with the greatness and the glory of our redemption that he begins, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!" (v. 3a). In other words:

"May God be praised."

"May he be glorified."

"May he be worshipped."

"May his name be honored and revered."

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

And then he assigns the reason why God is so worthy of praise: "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" (v. 3b).

God has given us a *hope*. He has given us something to look forward to. He has given us an expectation of receiving something good. That's what hope is—an expectation of receiving something good.

Life without hope is bitter. Life without having anything to look forward to is meaningless. Without hope there is no strength to carry on. There is no will to live.

In Proverbs, Solomon says,

Hope deferred makes the heart sick,
but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life (Prov. 13:12).

Hope deferred, that is, hope delayed or put off, makes the heart sick. And if hope merely *deferred* makes the heart sick, what happens when hope is taken away altogether—when there is no hope at all? This is why people experience depression and commit suicide. They feel they have nothing to look forward to in life. They have *no hope*—no expectation of anything good.

Peter, however, says, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who according to his great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope.” God has given us *hope*.

But notice that it is not merely hope, but a “*living* hope.” What does this modifying word, “*living*,” add to the meaning of “hope”?

We may understand the phrase “living hope” in either one of two ways. First, by “a living hope,” he may mean, “a hope of life,” that is, a hope of *eternal* life. The apostle Paul spoke of this when he wrote to Titus, “being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (Tit. 3:7; cf. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:1). In Christ we have a hope that transcends this mortal life—a hope that reaches beyond the date that will appear on our gravestone that indicates the

day of our death. We have the hope of eternal life.

This may be what Peter means here: “according to his great mercy he has caused us to be born again to a living hope”—a hope of eternal life.

On the other hand, “living hope” may stand in contrast to a *dead* hope, an *empty* hope, a misplaced hope, a hope that fails to be fulfilled, one hope that has little or even no chance of being fulfilled. And this is how I think we are to understand him. He uses “living hope” to mean a hope that will not leave us disappointed—a hope that will not fail to be realized.

In the Bible, this word “hope” means more than simply “wish,” which is how we often understand the word. The Christian’s hope is not like the hope of one who buys a lottery ticket and has a one in a million chance of winning and says, “I *hope* I win.” Such a person has no basis to confidently expect to win. His “hope” is just wishful thinking. He *may* win. But it’s not likely.

But the Christian’s hope is entirely different. The Christian’s hope is built upon a secure foundation. It is certain. It will not fail to materialize. For the one who buys a lottery ticket and hopes to win—his hope may or may not be realized, with a greater chance that it won’t. But for the Christian, it is not a matter of whether or not his hope will be realized; it will. It is only a matter of time. His hope is

certain.

And what is this hope? It is the hope of eternal glory, a heavenly inheritance that can never be taken away from us, as Peter says, “an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you” (v. 4).

Think of it. We who were sinners, who deserved the wrath and curse of God forever, who had nothing for which to hope, but had only a certain fearful expectation of judgment—we have had our sins forgiven through the blood of Christ and have been given the confident expectation of eternal glory in heaven. This is no fable. A little later Peter says, “We did not follow cleverly devised myths [tales]” (2 Pet. 1:16a). The gospel is a reality. Our eternal inheritance in heaven is a reality. And it’s a reality that changes everything. It changes our whole outlook on life.

Those who do not know the Lord and have no sense of foreboding hanging over their heads like a dark cloud, who have no fear of God, no sense of his wrath, no fearful anticipation of judgment to come, but instead live life happily as though everything is all right—*they* are living a dream. They are living in profound ignorance. They’re living in a make-believe world. *If they viewed things correctly*, they would tremble at the danger they’re in, knowing that at any moment they could die and drop straight into hell and experience the full force of the wrath of Almighty God. For the non-Christian there is no hope,

ultimately. He may not realize this; he may be in a state of denial, *but it is true*. He has no hope. If he perceived things correctly, he would be plunged into utter despair, knowing what awaits him at the judgment.

But some, by God's grace, have been awakened from their dream and have seen their awful danger. They have felt the fear of God. They have trembled at the thought of judgment to come. The future for them seemed all dark and hopeless. There was only despair as they considered the wrath of God and the punishment due them because of their sins. But then they turned to Christ and their sins were forgiven. Their condemnation was taken away, and instead of the fearful prospect of judgment to come, now they have a confident expectation of future glory—an eternal state of blessedness in the presence of God, and of the Savior Jesus Christ, and all the holy angels, and the spirits of just men made perfect. From despair, they have been born again to a living hope, to obtain an inheritance kept in heaven for them.

And the apostle traces all of this back to God's great mercy: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope."

Now, Peter is not content to attribute all this merely to God's mercy, but to his *great* mercy. And indeed, the depth of the Lord's mercy is past finding out. It is beyond all measure, but it is evidenced in the fact that he has redeemed a sinful people for himself, and redeemed

them at a great cost to himself.

It is according to his great mercy that we are saved and given a hope. It is due to his kindness alone. He has had pity upon us. We had *no claim* to his favor. There was no goodness in us that we could plead on our behalf. Paul put it like this, "He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy" (Tit. 3:5)—the free, unmerited kindness of God. He has pitied us, and sent Jesus to be our Redeemer to die upon the cross and make satisfaction for our sins; and he has sent the Holy Spirit to give sight to our blind eyes, to soften our hardened heart. He has caused us to be born again, so that we might believe and be saved. All this was done according to his great mercy, so that we have cause to bless and magnify his name on account of it, and to say with Peter: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope."

And then he tells us what it was that has secured this hope for us. "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*" (v. 3b). Jesus' resurrection is the guarantee of the gospel. It is the ground and foundation of our hope. His resurrection is the Father's demonstration that he has accepted Christ's death as a full satisfaction for the sins of His people. It's proof that their sins have been paid for in full. It also demonstrates that he is victorious over death and all our spiritual enemies, and serves a guarantee of our own resurrection.

The resurrection of Christ is fundamental to the Christian faith. It is the guarantee of everything else that the faith teaches. As Paul says, if Christ is not raised, then our faith is vain and we are still in our sins.

Liberal theologians deny the resurrection of Christ but wish to retain the name of Christianity. But that is all they have—just a name and nothing else. Without the resurrection the Christian faith ceases to be anything meaningful. It is one grand delusion. If Christ is not raised from the dead there is no hope for us beyond the grave, and we can say with Macbeth, upon the death of his wife:

“Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing.” Macbeth (Act 5, Scene 5, lines 24-28)

If Christ is not raised, the Christian faith is false, and life nothing more than “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing.”

Christian faith stands or falls with the resurrection of Christ, and this why skeptics so often focus their attacks upon the faith at the point of the resurrection of Christ.

First, Peter had blessed God on account of our redemption.

Then he speaks of the saints’ joy in the salvation purchased for them

through the blood of Christ. "In this [salvation, redemption, this eternal inheritance which has been given to you in Christ] you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials" (v. 6). The greatness of this salvation is so profound that it more than compensates for the suffering you endure on account of it. Even though you experience various trials because of your faith, nevertheless you rejoice, because your salvation is so precious to you.

A few verses later he says, "You...rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and full of glory" (v. 8).

Now notice what he says about the prophets' attitude toward these things.

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look (1 Pet. 1:10-12).

Notice what he says about the attitude of the prophets, "*They searched and inquired carefully*, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ was indicating..." These words express the sense of anticipation and longing the prophets had to see the fulfillment of the promises, and their desire to more fully understand the prophecies

which they themselves had been privileged to give.

Imagine Isaiah, for instance, after having recorded the prophecy of Christ's suffering and subsequent exaltation, sitting down and examining with diligence what he himself had written, seeking to understand what it meant, to whom it applied, and when the events would occur.

Surely he has borne our griefs,
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions;
He was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his stripes we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned every one to his own way
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all (Isa. 53:4-6)

Centuries later the Ethiopian Eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this?" (Acts 8:34). Isaiah might have asked the same question, "Of whom do I say this?" "To whom does it refer, and when shall he appear?"

And so, through the ages, the prophets, one by one—at many times and in many ways—spoke of the suffering of Christ and the glories to follow, and they longed to understand their prophecies and to see them fulfilled.

Think here of blessed old Simeon, who when he had seen the Lord's Christ, and taken the infant Jesus in his arms, said,

Lord, now are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation
that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and glory to your people Israel (Lk. 2:29-32)

He, like many prophets before him, had made careful search and inquiry, and had longed to see the Lord's salvation. Although he, unlike those before him, had his desire fulfilled, and he died contented. He saw the Lord's Christ.

Jesus said to His disciples,

Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it (Matt. 13:16-17)

And with this agrees the words of Paul to the Hebrews, speaking of the Old Testament saints, "All these died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar" (Heb. 11:13a). He speaks of the distance of time. They saw these things—though vaguely—lying in the future, and they welcomed them, but they died without having personally seen them fulfilled.

First, Peter blesses God on account of his great mercy in our salvation.

Second, he refers to the joy experienced by all the saints on account of their redemption.

Third, he shows how the prophets eagerly anticipated salvation in Christ by diligently seeking to understand their prophecies and longing for their fulfillment.

And finally he refers to the interest that even the angels in heaven have in these things. Notice that he says at the end of verse 12 that these are “things into which angels long to look.” A Scottish divine by the name of Alexander Nisbet writes, “He affirms that this way of salvation through Christ...is so ravishing a subject that it takes up the delight and study of the angels in heaven to pry in upon it.”

Indeed, Paul tells us in the 3rd chapter of his epistle to the Ephesians that the “through the church the manifold wisdom of God” is “made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (Eph. 3:10). He seems to be saying that the salvation of God’s people through the suffering and death of Christ is a revelation to the angels of the manifold wisdom of God, and an unfolding of all his perfections.

The whole matter of man’s salvation must stir up within the holy angels a profound reverence for God, and inspire a deep admiration for all of his glorious attributes—to see the perfect blend of his justice and

mercy displayed in the cross, his holy indignation toward sin, yet his love for sinners.

This must arouse their interest all the more seeing as how God chose *not* to redeem fallen angels. As the writer of Hebrews says,

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil... For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham (Heb. 2:14, 16).

God, in his sovereignty, chose not to redeem fallen angels; and the angels, thus became acquainted with the severity of his justice. But God, in an *equally* sovereign manner, being moved by nothing other than his own good pleasure, chose to redeem the fallen sons of Adam. And the angels thus became acquainted with his mercy. It was an aspect of God's character that the angels had not seen before, and now it was set before their eyes in a stunning display: the Almighty and Eternal God, severe in judgment, who "did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment" (2 Pet. 2:4), has shown mercy to the sons of men, and given them a Savior, Jesus Christ, his own beloved Son—given him over to die as an atonement for their sins. What a striking and astonishing display of the love and mercy of God toward sinners! These are things into which angels long to look!

How is it, then, that any mortal man can be unconcerned or uninterested in these things? The angels themselves have no personal interests at stake. It is not for *them* that Christ has died; but they nevertheless have a deep desire to look into what God has done to redeem sinful *men*. And if they, whose salvation is not at stake, have such a profound interest in these things, how much more should we, whose salvation depends upon them? The angels are interested because of what it reveals about the goodness and glory of God. And if you are unconcerned or uninterested, isn't this fact itself sufficient for your damnation, that God has given his Son as an atonement for sin, that he has given such a marvelous display of his mercy, and you—you are too uninterested to concern yourself with it? How utterly sinful and worthy of damnation is a man's indifference to these things! As Paul says in Hebrews, "How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?" (Heb. 2:3a).

Perhaps there are some here...