

Script: Pastor Frank R. Johnson

First Peter: Truth and Hope for Sojourners “The Difference Hope Makes” (1 Peter 1:6-12)

Take a first look.

I. The editors of *Preaching Today* recounted this story: “In the Middle Ages the sea route to India seemed an impossibility. It was often discussed in the great economic and political centers of Europe. They used to wonder whether there would be a route around the bottom tip of Africa to that rich land of the spices. Many had tried and all had failed. The tip of Africa had become known as the Cape of Storms.

“Then an explorer called Vasco da Gama decided he was going to try again. He succeeded. Ever since he returned to Lisbon it could never be doubted again that it could be done. He proved that to use that treacherous way wasn’t inevitably disastrous. The Cape of Storms eventually became known as the Cape of Good Hope.”¹

My friends, Jesus is a cosmic and spiritual edition of Vasco da Gama. He has traveled through the treacherous storms of death itself and has come out alive! He can turn our own Cape of Storms into the Cape of Good Hope.

II. What a difference our hope in Christ makes! This hope comes to us because of what Jesus Christ has done and because of what He promised to His followers. The same Simon Peter who turned away in fear and denied even knowing Jesus at His crucifixion, came to be a bold defender of this hope.

III. Listen as Peter describes the difference such a hope makes.

Take a closer look at 1 Peter 1:6-12.

I. HOPE MAKES A DIFFERENCE IN OUR EXPERIENCE OF SUFFERING. vv. 6-7

1. *Suffering in this life, compared to our hope for eternity, is only “for a little while.”* Peter says, “In *this* you greatly rejoice, even though you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.” What is “this”? It is our hope for eternity, as the passage just prior to this describes it, *a hope based on the mercy of God, founded on the resurrection of Jesus, and responding to the promise of God.*

A—When in a stressful situation, whether deserved or undeserved, we must look up, look beyond this present moment, and grasp our hope in Christ!

Suffering is not the end of the story! Jesus has risen! He promises us victory over suffering, even over the biggest bully on the playground of life, death itself.

2. *Suffering has a refining effect for the believer.* Both Paul (Romans, chapter 5) and James (chapter 1) echo this refining effect on the character of the believer that comes through suffering. Peter says that our faith is “proved genuine” through our endurance of suffering in a spirit of hope.

¹ <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2021/april/vasco-da-gama-and-cape-of-good-hope.html>.

A—Is our hope in God, founded on the work of Christ, carrying us through this present experience of hardship?

I—Consider what our brothers and sisters in Christ have had to endure in the former Soviet Union, where for over 70 years it was illegal to practice faith in God in any form openly without being under the strict control of the central government.

Thomas Oden was a theologian who was invited to lecture in the University of Moscow back in 1989 and again in 1991, just before and just after the fall of the Soviet Union. In his book *Two Worlds*, he describes some of his experience there:

“Many, I know, were praying every day for me during my time in Moscow. I felt prayers being answered unobtrusively and inexplicably. This is not an experience I often have, so I do not mention it routinely or flippantly. Just before I left Rome, I was told that I would be in the daily prayers of the Jesuit faculty of the Gregorian University, praying in Italian. I also knew that evangelical colleagues in the United States were daily praying for me.

“I was learning once again that even the most dismal and pathetic human situations can be fruitful, challenging and spiritually fertile. [Note the emphasis on the refining effect of suffering] I was grateful to God as I trudged through the heavy snow. I worshiped constantly in Moscow. I awoke one morning to the radio strains of “Amazing Grace.” Could this be Moscow? I wondered.

“The further I proceeded the more I felt constantly preceded by grace amid the web of Soviet enigmas. Every step felt quietly shaped by providence. I was aware of the Spirit’s guidance. How else could all this have happened? I wondered. It is difficult even now for me to think of the Soviet encounter without the premise of providence.”²

He says that the stereotype “that atheism remains a vital wellspring of Soviet policy is based on a gross misunderstanding. There is as much general boredom with atheism as with communism, and each seems to have taken the other down in a fitful dual drowning—with each trying to find footing on the other’s head.”³

He reminds us that Leningrad was almost overnight renamed St. Petersburg, after the man who wrote this letter we are reading together. This was a symbol of the hope that sprang once again, even through the many years of obstruction. “It is April in Moscow,” he writes, “and the buds are pushing through dirty ice. Sunshine peeks through wee holes.”⁴

And then he speaks prophetically to us. He calls us in the materialistic West to take note: “Hedonic narcissistic Americans [meaning, pleasure-seeking and selfish Americans] do well to learn from that wellspring of arduous experience, and not presume to teach Russians an elementary course in Spirituality 101. Our own materialistic culture is far more deeply corrupted than theirs in many ways. There is little room for boasting. Those emerging out of seventy-three years of atheism may be more open to the address of God through the suffering neighbor than we in pious and secular America.

“Even though people were killed in the atheistic oppression, we were told the image of God in them was not harmed. Many have learned what it means to suffer for righteousness’ sake. That stamps the human spirit with a special beauty. It clarifies intentionality, deepens the spirit, challenges idolatry.”⁵

[I share this at length to serve as a warning. American higher education continues its love-affair with socialism. New York recently elected a man who is a bundle of contradictions: an Islamic Socialist—unless you understand the Islamic strategy to form alliances with useful idiots

² Thomas C. Oden, *Two Worlds: Notes on the Death of Modernity in America & Russia* (Downers Grove, Ill, 1992), pp. 123-24.

³ Oden, p. 129.

⁴ Oden, p. 155.

⁵ Oden, pp. 153-54.

to take power. What happens to the atheist when Islam takes power? He suddenly can't be found.]

3. *Endurance of suffering will result in praise to God.* It has in the former Soviet Union. It did in the ancient world. It always will. God is glorified in the simplest saint offering suffering up to Him and trusting Him through it.

A—When we endure, when we find the place of rejoicing in the work of Christ—His death and resurrection—and in the hope which that finished work makes possible for us, our hearts, no our very lives, rise up as an offering of praise to God.

I—Catherine Marshall was married to the noted pastor Peter Marshall, who was for a time the chaplain of the United States Senate. She has told, “My friend Marge had an experience aboard a plane bound for Cleveland, waiting for takeoff. As she settled into her seat, Marge noticed a strange phenomenon. On one side of the airplane a sunset suffused the entire sky with glorious color. But out of the window next to her seat, all Marge could see was a sky dark and threatening, with no sign of the sunset.

“As the plane's engines began to roar, a gentle Voice spoke within her.

“You have noticed the windows,’ he murmured beneath the roar and thrust of takeoff. ‘Your life, too, will contain some happy, beautiful times, but also some dark shadows. Here’s a lesson I want to teach you to save you much heartache and allow you to “abide in Me” with continual peace and joy.’

“You see, it doesn’t matter which window you look through; this plane is still going to Cleveland. So it is in your life. You have a choice. You can dwell on the gloomy picture. Or you can focus on the bright things and leave the dark, ominous situations to Me. I alone can handle them anyway. The final destination is not influenced by what you see and hear along the way.’

“Learn this, act on it and you will be released, able to experience the “peace that passes understanding.””⁶

What a difference hope makes!

II. HOPE MAKES A DIFFERENCE IN OUR EXPERIENCES OF JOY AND LOVE. vv. 8-9

1. *Hope brings us to love the One who has made possible our future because of His mercy and promise.* We love Him, not because we have seen Him—many who did, did not come to love Him. We love Him and we learn to love others, because He first loved us (1 John 4:19) and has promised us a future than can never “perish, spoil, or fade.”

A— Have we received this love into our lives?

I—It is powerful to change others. Rebecca Hartvigsen had degrees in counseling and theology but knew nothing about special education when she took a job working with developmentally disabled people. One of those people was Brenda, a young woman with cerebral palsy and some mental challenges. “One day Rebecca took Brenda to get her hair cut, and then they went to a restaurant for lunch. Brenda is a very friendly and joyful person,” she related. “As they were starting their lunch, three people came and took the booth behind them. Brenda turned around and spoke to one of the men and pulled on his arm. Smiling and pointing to her hair, she said, ‘Look at my new haircut!’

“Jerking his arm away, the man said to his companions, ‘We can’t sit here. I don’t want

⁶ Catherine Marshall, "Touching the Heart of God," *Christianity Today* (5-15-95).

to be bothered.’ Then he asked the restaurant hostess, ‘Why do you let people like this come in here anyway?’ Brenda looked at him, still smiling. ‘You don’t know how to love,’ she said firmly with joy in her voice. As the party moved to another table, Brenda turned around and continued her lunch. Rebecca was furious, but Brenda wasn’t the least bit upset. A few minutes later, the man walked back over and told Rebecca, “She’s right. I don’t know how to love.’ Turning to Brenda, he said, ‘Your hair looks beautiful.’”⁷

It is the love of Jesus that truly teaches us to love, both by example and by the presence and power of His Spirit.

2. *Our faith in Him yields a joy that cannot be put into words, because our experience of His salvation has begun already.* Peter says that “salvation” is not just a future experience. He could say to the Christians then, “You *are receiving* [present tense] the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (v. 9). It is still true of believers in Jesus. Through faith in Jesus, we are now experiencing what has been called “the presence of the future.”

A—Have we allowed the abiding presence of Jesus by His Spirit to produce the fruit of joy in our lives? This comes as the focus of our lives turns from that which is merely temporary and turns to that which is permanent, eternal. Note the cluster of interrelated facets of Christian experience:

(1) You love Him.

(2) You believe in Him.

(3) You are filled with ... joy.

I—It’s a matter of vision. When we see Him as He is, our hearts respond with joy and love. The stories of the past record that following a great victory, King Cyrus of Persia took as prisoners a noble prince, his wife, and their children. When they were brought into the leader’s tent to stand before him, Cyrus said to the prince, “What will you give me if I set you free?” He replied, “I will give you half of all that I possess.” “And what will you give me if I release your children?” continued Cyrus. “Your majesty, I will give you all that I possess.” The king asked him one more question, “But what will you give me if I set your wife at liberty?” He glanced momentarily at his life partner, and then the prince replied without hesitation, “If you will restore my wife to freedom, I will give you my life.” Cyrus was so moved by his devotion that he released the entire family without asking recompense.

As the story goes, that evening the prince said to his wife, “Did you not think Cyrus a very handsome man?” “I did not notice him,” she answered, “Why? How could you not notice him?” exclaimed her husband. She replied, “I had eyes only for the one who said he would lay down his life for me.”⁸

Consider the greatness of the love that Jesus Christ has for us that He *would* lay down His life for us—and He *has*! When we meditate on such a love, when we turn our eyes upon Him, it brings joy to the heart.

III. HOPE MAKES A DIFFERENCE IN OUR SERVICE TO GOD. vv. 10-12

1. *The prophets of the Old Covenant period proclaimed their messages with hope, though they spoke of things often far into the future.* [vv. 10-11] Peter says that they yearned to

⁷ *Youthworker Journal*, Summer 1991, page 78.

⁸ From Illustration collection, I.S.

know and to see what God brought about through His Son Jesus Christ. They saw this grace from a distance.

I—They had a view through a spiritual telescope, so to speak. They pointed the lens that God gave them toward the future, and they saw truly what lay beyond their own experience. By God’s grace, at this time in salvation history, we have boarded the ship that will take us there. We can see Him closer in the face of Jesus Christ. One day we will land on that “new heaven and earth” and see Him face to face.

A—We, too, can speak with confidence of the future, though we see it dimly as in a mirror according to Paul, because we have come to know His love and grace for ourselves.

2. By their faithful service to God, the Old Covenant prophets were serving the believers of the New Covenant period. They faithfully proclaimed what they saw. And what they saw pointed in truth and faithfulness to what God has now accomplished through Jesus Christ.

A—This is the ultimate result of receiving the love, joy, and hope that Jesus Christ produces in human lives. We can then get beyond selfish motivations and serve others in His name.

I—I read the story of a Presbyterian church that has learned this well. As you may know, our Presbyterian friends practice the baptism of infants, something which we Baptist-Christians reserve for a profession of faith in Christ after conversion. [With respect, we make a better case from the New Testament on this question of believers’ baptism. 😊] However, the Presbyterian practice of baptism seems to mean just a bit more than our child-dedication services: an opportunity to pray for the child and the parents as a church, asking God to bless the child as he/she grows to understand and accept the grace of God personally in the future.

Around Thanksgiving one year, a middle-aged woman lingered behind after witnessing just such a ceremony. The pastor, according to custom, had asked the traditional question, “Who stands with this child?” after which the whole clan had stood.

She hesitantly but clearly presented her situation. Her 18-year-old daughter had just had a baby after getting involved with an older young man. The mom expressed the daughter’s desire to bring the baby in for the ceremony, but that she was very nervous because of her bad choices.

The pastor told her that he would present the request to their church board for approval. At that meeting, he presented the situation. Here is a young woman, a member of the church, who has had a baby boy, and the father is not taking any responsibility. What should they do? They decided that since the girl lived right there in the small town, and that since she was returning to the Lord and to the church, they would agree. The date was set for the Sunday before Christmas.

As usual, there were many people in attendance on that Sunday. At the proper time, down the aisle came Tina and her little baby boy, one-month-old Jimmy. The pastor felt, “This young mother was so alone. It would be a hard life for this pair.”

He began the ceremony and then came to the question, “Who stands with this child?” He nodded at the mother slightly, to coax her to her feet. She rose slowly, looking to either side, and then smiled back at the pastor.

He was just about to ask the parent’s questions of the ceremony, when he became aware of movement in the pews. He looked up to see an older couple standing, then a couple of members of his church board stood, then the sixth-grade Sunday school teacher, then a new young couple in church, and “soon,” he reported, “before my incredulous eyes, the whole church was standing up with little Jimmy.”

He tells the closing scene: "Tina was crying. Mildred Cory [her mother] held on to the pew as though she were standing on the deck of a rocking ship, which, in a way, she was.

"The Scripture reading that morning was a few verses from John:

See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God.... No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.... There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.

"In that [moment], those old words came alive; they were clothed in flesh, and everybody felt it."⁹

When our hope is in Christ alone; when we have come to experience a relationship with Him based on grace and received by faith alone; we can serve those far beyond ourselves because we know that "He who began a good work in you [and in those we serve] will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (cf. Philippians 1:6).

Take it home (applications).

I. IS OUR HOPE FIRMLY IN JESUS CHRIST TODAY?

1. We must admit our sin and need of forgiveness.

2. We must believe in the mercy of God offered in Christ.

3. We must open our hearts to Him, inviting Him to enter and make us new from the inside out.

II. LET HIS HOPE MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THIS HOUR OF HARDSHIP.

III. LET HIS HOPE BRING FORTH FROM OUR HEARTS A WELLSPRING OF LOVE AND JOY.

IV. LET HIS HOPE COMPEL US TO OFFER OURSELVES TO HIM TO LIVE THE SERVANT-LIFE, loving others with grace in the name of Jesus.

⁹ *Chicken Soup for the Mother's Soul*, pp. 29-31.