Joy in the Midst of Trouble
1 Peter 1:3-9

We're looking at the first letter of Peter, one of the original 12 disciples of Jesus. And he's writing it to Christians in what's now modern-day Turkey who are feeling the growing pressure of being Christians. But you wouldn't get that impression from the tone of what he writes.

You see, imagine you're at a funeral. And someone stands at the front and starts reminding everyone of all the wonderful things about the person who's died. What are they doing? They're giving a eulogy. It's a word that comes from the Greek word Peter begins our passage with, v3, '*Blessed be - eulogetos* - the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.' Let me tell you all these wonderful things about God.

Except, God's not dead, and this letter isn't a funeral, because it's not just the dead we eulogise.

I recently had lunch with a friend and for dessert we ordered profiteroles. And they came with a little jug of thick, dark, velvety, melted chocolate sauce. And no exaggeration, my friend went into ecstasies, 'o man, don't you just love Switzerland, what a country!' All his past experiences of tasting melt-in-the-mouth Swiss chocolate, and the anticipation of doing it again, left him unable to contain himself: 'Switzerland you are amazing!' He was eulogising.

What does that for you? What looses your tongue like that? What fills your heart like that and you've just got to express it? What gets you eulogising?

The Search for Happiness, the Need for Hope
And for Peter it was God - 'blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.' And it might be the same for you, or it might not. Or you might say, I don't think there's anything in my life right now that fills my heart with joy like that.

And yet, we all want there to be something. Blaise Pascal wrote, "All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end… They will never take the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of every man." In other words, every choice we make, we make because we think we'll be happier by choosing *this*, and not *that*. We think this is the pathway to joy.

And the things that make us happy, that give us joy, are the things that get us through the *un*happy times. Work is stressful, but at least I get to ski on Saturday. This relationship is rocky, but at least there's my bike. My boss is horrible, but at least my wife, husband, or family love me.

And as you rehearse in your mind the happiness these things bring you, they give you hope. Things are bad now, but I've got *this* to look forward to.

Well, look *why* Peter blesses God: v3, 'According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again *to a living hope*.' The present reality of life for the people Peter's writing to was hard and hostile. They're facing increasing opposition for being Christians. In fact, he says in v6, 'you have been *grieved* by various trials.'

Now, why does someone grieve? When they lose someone or something dear to them. So these guys are going through stuff that's taking stuff from them. They've become Christians and they're

losing respect with their neighbours. They're losing out on business and trade. They're facing financial loss. And as happens today in the Hindu or Muslim world, they've become Christians and they're facing the loss of family - you're not my son anymore. Sure, they're not being burned at the stake, yet, but they're facing stuff Peter describes in v7 as being 'tested by fire'.

And when you're experiencing that kind of loss, more than ever you rely on the things that make you happy, that bring you joy, to get you through, because they tell you, 'there's still hope, life's still worth living.'

But what if you lose *those* things? Where are you supposed to find joy and happiness when the things that give you joy are taken from you? Let's say your happiness is tied up with your family, what happens if tragedy strikes? Or maybe your sense of integrity helps you take costly decisions at work; what happens when someone trashes your reputation and there's no getting it back?

Years ago, I was talking to a young man who pursued sport aggressively. And he was clear why. It helped him cope with the pressures of life. It made him feel alive. This was where he was happy. So I asked him, how would you cope if you couldn't do this anymore? And without hesitating he said, 'I couldn't, I'd have to end it.'

You see, when you lose the thing that helps you cope with loss, what then?

It's why we all need what Peter calls a *living* hope - a hope that can't be lost, that can't be taken from you, that doesn't die when everything else is dying.

The question is, where can you get it?

New Birth, New Life

And the answer is, you can't *get* that hope. You have to receive it. You have to be given it.

Verse 3 again, 'According to his *great mercy*, [God] has caused us *to be born again* to a living hope.'

Now, when someone's merciful to you, they're choosing not to treat you like you deserve to be treated. You've messed up, they know it, but they let it go, they show you mercy. And Peter's saying that when you become a Christian you are a recipient of God's mercy. We've done stuff we know we shouldn't, and we haven't done stuff we know we should, plus we've ignored him. Worse, we've made ourselves god in place of him. But in his mercy, rather than condemn us he causes us to be born again.

Now, what does *that* mean? Well, Nicodemus had the same question. And he was a Jewish leader who came to Jesus at night. But before he could ask his questions, Jesus told him "Truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." (John 3:3). And Nicodemus is incredulous. 'How can anyone be born again?! He can hardly climb back inside his mother.' You see, Nicodemus thinks the only way to start over is to *literally* start over. To erase the past; restore to factory settings; for *this* Nicodemus to cease to exist and a brand new one to be born.

But that's not what Jesus, or Peter, means. Instead, when you put your faith in Jesus for the first time, there is a real sense in which the old you dies, and our sins are wiped away. But our past is not. Instead, God redeems that past. And all those things you wish you'd never done, or had done to

you, God takes and turns and uses for good, in your life and in the lives of others. It's the same Nicodemus, the same you, but a transformed you. And you're alive in a way you never were before.

But you can't do that to yourself. You see, when a baby's born, you don't congratulate the baby, do you? 'Well done, you've given birth to yourself!' No, you congratulate the mother, because being born is something done *to* you, not *by* you. And so Christianity is not offering you the chance of a do-it-yourself spiritual makeover. It's something God does to you, as he changes and transforms your heart.

But is that kind of change really possible, or is it just a fiction? Well, look what Peter grounds it in: a historical fact. Verse 3 again, 'he has caused us to be born again to a living hope *through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead*.'

It's why you can have a hope that lives when everything else is dying, Peter says. It's why you can know deep happiness in the midst of grievous loss: Christ has been raised from the dead. And that changes everything. As JKA Smith, professor of Philosophy at Calvin College writes in his latest book, *'How to Inhabit Time'*, 'when the dead are raised, not even death is the end'. When not even the dead are lost, nothing is lost.

But there are alternatives to living with hope, aren't there, especially when life is hard. We could fall back on nostalgia and wish for a life that used to be. But that's no help in living the reality of today. Or, you could still look to the future, not the past, but do so with despair. You read the future, but not through the lens of Jesus's resurrection, and it looks dark.

Instead, Peter's saying, when you experience the new life that flows out of Christ's resurrection you can look squarely at today, but live with hope, because you know something better is coming.

Trouble Now, Riches to Come

Look at v4. Peter says these Christians have been born again to a living hope *and* 'to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.'

Now, these guys are suffering because they're Christians. And in an honour/shame culture, maybe some of their families have told them, 'You've brought shame on us with this Christian thing and we're cutting you off.' And to be cut off from your inheritance would be to be cut off from financial security.

But, Peter says, in his great mercy God has caused you to be born again to an inheritance no one can touch.

Now, you're unlikely to be cut out of your parents' will for being a Christian, though as I said - in the Hindu/Muslim world that happens. But you may still suffer loss. In 2 Timothy 3:12 the apostle Paul says 'all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.' So just to *want* to live a godly life might cost you. That may be as low grade as snide remarks from colleagues. It may be having potential career openings closed on you. Like the Christian medical student who wants to pursue obstetrics but can't get a post because they won't do abortions. It might be that you find yourself terminated from your job because you refuse to engage in unethical practices. It might be relational, like a friend who would have loved to marry but the only offers that came were from non-Christians, and she rightly refused. Is that persecution? No. But it's still a loss of what might have been because of faithfulness to Jesus.

And when that's the case, you need to know something better's coming. And it is, Peter says. An inheritance that doesn't go up and down like the stock market or people's opinion of you. An inheritance that doesn't disappear like cryptocurrency or crumble like property. An inheritance, v4, 'kept in heaven for you.'

It's as if God is saying, 'hey, look up. You inheritance is safe with me. Others may have written you out but I've written you in. It's got your name on it.'

The question is what's 'it'? What's the inheritance?

Aaron and the Old Testament priests probably wondered the same, because all the other tribes were being allotted tracks of land in the Promised Land as their inheritance, but not the priests. Instead God said to them, "You shall have no inheritance in their land… I am your portion and your inheritance." (Num 18:20). And to know God, and to experience and enjoy God, and to have all of his goodness directed towards you for all eternity, is an inheritance better than land or reputation or career or spouse. It's a gain far beyond any loss.

And, when the time comes, Peter says, it's yours.

And the time *will* come. *It's* kept for you, and *you* are guarded for it, Peter says. Verse 5, 'Who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.' So, like soldiers guard a city, these Christians and you and me, are being guarded by God.

But guarded from what? Because they're clearly not being guarded from trouble, are they? And you're not being guarded from trials, from hostile bosses, or critical family members, or the loss of those you love.

It's that God will guard them and us *through* trials. Because the only thing that can rob us of our inheritance is to quit the race before the finish line and fail to claim the prize. And Peter's saying, God won't let you do that, he'll get you across the line.

But how does he do it? Because maybe there are days when you're struggling to stay in the faith, or you see your friends abandoning the faith. Well, he does it 'through faith' Peter says. And he doesn't mean faith in yourself, telling yourself, 'I can do this; I can get through this.' It's faith in God. The same faith that got them into trouble, is the same faith that will see them out the other side. An unwavering belief that whatever anyone else says about you or does to you, God loves you so much he sent Jesus to die for you, so he's not going to let you go now. And he raised him from the dead, so not even death can triumph over you.

It's why Peter says we're being guarded through faith v5, 'for *a salvation* ready to be revealed in the last time.'

Now, today, it might be acceptable to talk about our country needing saving from the left or the right, or the planet needing saving from climate change. But the idea that *you and I* need saving from our sin, that's not so acceptable. Because it's everyone else who's the problem, not me. The Bible's much more realistic than that, because it says the fundamental problem's not out there, it's 'in here'. But it also says, God has the power to turn the 'in here' around. To make it new. To save you.

And it talks of salvation as past, present and future. When you first turn to Christ, you're saved. He forgives your sin, takes you out of the domain of darkness and transfers you to the kingdom of his Son. But what follows is a lifetime of being saved. Until, as Peter says, you're finally and completely saved at, v7, 'the revelation of Jesus Christ.'

Because when Jesus returns he'll complete his work of redemption, he'll heal every hurt and make good every loss, and right every wrong.

And that ultimate salvation is ready to go, Peter says. Like a brand new car at a motor show, it may be under wraps, it may be hid behind the curtain, but it is ready for its unveiling. And it doesn't need any more tweaks by the designers or tinkering by the engineers, all it needs is the appointed time and the curtain pulled back. And your complete salvation is simply waiting for that moment, Peter says.

And knowing that has transforms the way these under-pressure Christians respond to what they're facing.

Joy in the Midst of Trial

Verse 6, 'In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials.'

Imagine your life and eternity as one infinitely long piece of string. And for tens and hundreds and thousands of kilometres you are going to enjoy God and all of his goodness, for all of eternity. In comparison, this life and its trials are just a centimetre or two. They're for 'a little while'.

And Peter's not minimising suffering or loss. He knew what it was to suffer. It's that in comparison to the endless ocean of blessing God has in store for you, what we suffer now is just a drop.

But standing in the middle of suffering we can struggle to see that, can't we? In fact, it doesn't even have to be suffering. Life can just be frustrating or not going the way I want it and I can be like Mr Magoo - too theologically short-sighted to read life right. I fixate on this centimetre of my life and fail to read it in the light of all that Jesus has done, is doing, and will do for me.

But when the people Peter's writing to fixed their eyes on the future, joy flooded their present.

But did you notice the words, 'if necessary'. Verse 6 again, 'In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, *if necessary,* you have been grieved by various trials.' Why does Peter think trials are necessary? Because if it was down to us, in our pursuit of happiness, we'd almost certainly vote them *un*necessary.

Well, look what he goes on to say, v7, 'So that *the tested genuineness* of your faith…' In other words, you can rejoice during trials because there's a point to them, they're necessary. And you're not experiencing what you're experiencing because of the malice of your boss, or the meanness of a family member, or the random chance of nature. It's that God is using this to refine your faith. A faith, v7, that is 'more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire.'

So, just like fire refines gold, hardship refines faith. It burns away our self-confidence. It bring idols to the surface. It purge wrong motives. It humbles pride. And as it does, this season of pain becomes a season of God working out more of Jesus' character into us.

Think how that might work. Maybe you've been harshly treated by others and it's hurt. But God's using that to make you gentle and generous to others. Maybe someone you love broke their promise to you and the wound's deep, but God's redeeming that by making you a person who keeps your promises to those you love. For reasons to do with his own upbringing, my father was emotionally and often physically absent. And that's left its scars. But God's used that to make me want to be a dad who's present.

And he does it through the trials we go through.

But there's another reason you can rejoice in trials: they prove your faith is genuine. Because when you continue to trust God in the midst of it, it's proof you're the real deal. There are all these painful reasons why you could walk away from Christ, but you don't. And just like gold has its hallmarks to prove its genuine, that's the hallmark of genuine faith.

And that kind of faith comes with a reward. It's faith, v7, that 'may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ.' It'll be reason for eulogies! But for who?

Well, most commentators agree, for you, for the ones who face trials and hold on. It's to hear Jesus say to you, 'well done, good and faithful servant'. But ultimately it's glory for Jesus, because he's the one who paid the ultimate price to get you there.

And that's a reason to suffer well, Peter says, because you love him. Verse 8, 'Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him.'

Peter had seen Jesus. But that's not the crucial issue for whether or not you can live with joy and hope. Plenty of Peter's contemporaries saw Jesus, but they saw Jesus, son of Joseph, not Jesus, Son of God. They saw a carpenter, not the Creator. Because you could see Jesus but still not see him for who he is. As the One to be loved above every love.

But these early Christians loved Christ like that and as a result, v8-9, they 'rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.'

So, the Christian faith, what it means to be saved, is not about obeying a list of rules. It's not about a self-made spiritual make-over. It's not about enduring suffering with a stiff upper lip. It's about your search for happiness being met in Christ. It's about Christ redeeming your past, making all things new and as a result hope and joy flooding your life now, even when *now* is hard.