

Finding Hope in a Time of Suffering

Rich Nathan

Easter

1 Peter 1:3-9

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I normally begin my Easter messages by saying “Happy Easter!” But this is a hard Easter for much of our world. Billions of people around the world are on lockdown, confined to our homes and apartments. We’ve had funerals in our own congregation where loved ones have been unable to attend. Many people have postponed weddings. Millions of Americans have suddenly found themselves unemployed. High school and college seniors are missing the end of their senior years in school. Student plays and concerts and sports activities and art exhibits have all been canceled in the midst of this pandemic.

We’ve also seen incredible acts of heroism and self-sacrifice. Tens of thousands of health care workers have come out of retirement – doctors and nurses are putting their lives on the line to fight this pandemic. I heard about hundreds of health care workers from Georgia who chartered a flight to New York to help out.

But this Easter many of us have been living with fear and anxiety – not just for our own health or our own financial situation – but for the health and situations of loved ones – parents and grandparents and those who are immunocompromised. And then there is the epidemic of loneliness, especially for singles and widows and widowers who are confined to their home without any flesh and blood social connection. We’ve also seen a rise in domestic violence as

people have been pushed together, unable to escape the pressure cooker of their own lives.

This is a hard Easter!

We need a breakthrough regarding this virus. We need to be able to get together again, to hug each other, to visit friends and family without fear, to go back to work and to gather together in worship. This Easter what I think we need most of all is hope.

Easter is all about hope! Today I'm going to start a new series from 1 Peter titled "The Reason for Our Hope". We've taken that title from a theme verse of 1 Peter.

Slide 1 Peter 3:15a

¹⁵ But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.

You know, I heard a seminary professor say that he's never met a Christian in America who said that 1 Peter was their favorite book. If you ask American Christians what their favorite book in the Bible is, they might say "I find so much comfort in the Psalms. I go to Proverbs regularly for wisdom." Or in the New Testament, "I love the gospels – Luke or John." Or "My favorite book is Romans or Ephesians." This professor said he's never met a Christian in America who said "1 Peter is my favorite book." But he was teaching a seminary class with lots of international students and many of them said, "Oh, my favorite book in the Bible is 1 Peter." He asked why.

The answer universally was “Because 1 Peter gives Christians in my country hope because so many of them are suffering.”

1 Peter is all about finding hope in a time of suffering. That’s the title of today’s message, “Finding Hope in a Time of Suffering”. Let’s pray.

Slide 1 Peter 1:3-9

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 honor 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.

1 Peter 1:3-9 is a massive run on sentence. English teachers would pull their hair out over Peter’s grammar. In fact, the run on sentence actually goes for 10 verses – from verse 3 to verse 12. And Peter tells the recipients of this letter in his day – and he speaks to us today –

that the way you're going to thrive, the way you're going to get through this coronavirus thing or whatever else life throws at you is by holding on to your hope.

Slide 1 Peter 1:3

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,

Now, in the midst of virtually any crisis you're going to see the snake oil peddlers and charlatans marketing remedies. Before we look at what hope actually is, I want to talk about what hope is not.

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What hope is not

Hope is not empty hope!

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Empty hope

What the coronavirus has brought to the surface of the entire world's consciousness is our fear of death. Why are we practicing social distancing? So that we don't get sick and die! Or, God forbid, that we are carriers to someone else and we get them sick and they potentially die.

Coronavirus has raised to the world's consciousness our universal fear of death. It's such a common fear.

Here's the question I ask myself: How do people outside of Christian faith deal with the fear of death? To find an answer, I decided to go to the fount of all wisdom and knowledge in the 21st century. Of course, I'm talking about Wikipedia.

Wikipedia has an article about how to overcome the fear of death. As I read the article, I thought this is not particularly comforting. It doesn't give me much hope. Here's how the article begins:

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Understand that life is a cycle. People are born, people die and more people are born. Don't fear that you're being singled out and that you have to fear death!

In other words, stuff happens! Deal with it! Here's another bit of the deep wisdom found in Wikipedia:

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Live life the way you're supposed to. Don't waste your time worrying about death! Instead, fill each day with as much joy as possible and don't let things get you down. Go outside. Play with friends. Pick up a new sport.

Which, by the way, is not super-helpful counsel if you're in a nursing home. Go outside, take up a new sport. And it's also not super-helpful counsel if you're sheltering in place and you're locked down at home this Easter. Finally, Wikipedia says:

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Just do anything that will take your mind off dying! Swing dance! Skip rope! Get a tattoo!

Take a French cooking class! Do anything to help get your mind off the fact that one day you will die.

Now, empty hope will not carry us through real suffering. Empty hope won't get us through the death of a loved one. Empty hope won't help us with the loss of our jobs, with shattered dreams. Empty hope won't help us with the loss of our jobs or when we go through a divorce or a broken engagement or have our hearts broken. Over against these things, Peter offers us a living hope.

Slide 1 Peter 1:3

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,

What are the qualities of true hope? First of all, Peter speaks to us about a sure hope.

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Sure hope

Hope in the Bible is not the same thing as optimism. Hope is NOT just having a positive frame of mind. Hope in the Bible is not whistling past the graveyard. Hope is not “turning that frown upside down”. The Bible says that the way you and I find hope is by making sure that we bank on, that we trust in, that we put our hope in something sure and solid that will sustain us in the future no matter what!

A dozen times in the New Testament, the Scripture encourages us to hope in God or hope in Christ. We’re told in the Bible to put our hope in God’s steadfast love. There are many verses like this:

Slide 1 Peter 1:13

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.

My question to you this Easter is: What are you pinning your hope on during this pandemic? Are you pinning your hope on a politician’s promises that the economy will bounce back really quickly? Are you pinning your hope on scientists finding a quick cure or a vaccine? Are you simply hoping that you won’t suffer any real loss from this pandemic? Here’s what Peter says is the foundation for our sure hope:

Slide 1 Peter 1:3

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,

Edmond Clowney, a great New Testament theologian, said

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Our hope is anchored in the past: Jesus rose! Our hope remains in the present: Jesus lives!

Our hope is completed in the future: Jesus is coming!

I can have hope in any situation – because I have bet my life on this one sure thing – Jesus who was crucified for my sins rose from the dead! And his resurrection guarantees that if I have united myself with this risen Christ, I will be raised from the dead. And not only me, but everyone who unites themselves with the risen Christ through faith, all of you will be raised from the dead!

But how can we be sure that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is real? That's it's not just Wikipedia advice about distracting ourselves by taking up swing dancing or a new sport – anything to get our minds off of death. How can we be sure that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is not just snake oil being peddled by some politician or televangelist?

The case for the resurrection of Jesus Christ is stronger today than it's ever been. There is a new generation of biblical scholars who have been examining in a fresh way the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ which is the foundation of Christian hope. New Testament historians like Gary Habermas and Mike Licona are authors of a wonderful book called *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*.

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Book cover

They've proposed a new way of making the argument for the certainty of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. They call their argument the "minimal facts" approach. What they are saying in their book essentially is let's look at the lowest common denominator of the facts, the ones that New Testament historians agree to whether they are Christians and have faith or they're agnostic or even atheist, what's the lowest common denominator that all New Testament historians agree to and let's make a case for those things!

So if you have an open mind and are asking, what are the agreed upon minimal facts of the resurrection of Jesus – here they are.

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Fact 1 – Jesus died by crucifixion

Jesus' death on a cross is undisputed by historians. Virtually no New Testament historian or any historian of the Greco Roman period of history disputes this solid fact. Jesus of Nazareth certainly died by crucifixion.

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Fact 2 – Jesus' tomb was empty

New Testament historians agree that not only the gospel's witnesses, but Roman and Jewish witnesses all concur that the tomb Jesus was buried in was later found empty.

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Fact 3 – Many people reported meeting the risen Jesus

This is agreed upon by the believing and nonbelieving historians. Lots of Jesus claimed that they met the risen Jesus.

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Fact 4 – The early church grew explosively after Jesus was crucified

Everyone agrees about that fact. It's really important to remember that the claim to be the Messiah was not uncommon in the first century. Would-be messiahs other than Jesus drew lots of followers. The only difference is that when these other people were killed by the Romans,

their followers went home or found themselves a new messiah. What they did not do was immediately begin to proclaim that their messiah had risen from the dead and that they met him. But Jesus' followers were absolutely unique. They went everywhere proclaiming our Messiah died on a cross for the sins of the world, but God raised him from the dead!

Let me review the facts real quickly.

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Fact 1 – Jesus died by crucifixion

Fact 2 – Jesus' tomb was empty

Fact 3 – People reported meeting the risen Christ

Fact 4 – The Christian church grew explosively after Jesus was crucified

Habermas and Licona argue convincingly in their book that there is no alternative theory that better accounts for these four facts than this one truth – Jesus Christ was raised from the dead.

What we're pinning our hope on in the midst of this pandemic and any other threat to our lives is a sure thing, a certain thing – the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Christian hope is not just a sure hope, it's a

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Realistic hope

Slide 1 Peter 1:6

⁶In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

Peter is not a preacher of a prosperity gospel – if you have enough faith this virus will not hurt you or your loved ones. No one in the New Testament preaches a prosperity gospel. Peter is saying – this Easter, you may be an atheist or an agnostic, a nominal Muslim or an Orthodox Jew; you may be a cradle Catholic who has always been in the Catholic church; you may be a C and E Christian (you go to church on Christmas and Easter) or you may be a thoroughly devoted follower of Jesus Christ. Regardless of your belief, regardless of your behavior – you may be a high integrity person or a low integrity person – regardless of your education or race or income or position in the church, you may have to suffer all kinds of trials as a result of this pandemic. There is no escape from suffering in this world.

Christian hope is a realistic hope. Some of you older listeners may remember the name James Stockdale.

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Picture of James Stockdale

He ran for Vice President back in 1992. He was a US Navy Vice-Admiral and was a POW in Vietnam for seven years. He was the most senior US Naval officer held captive in Vietnam. There's something called the Stockdale Paradox.

Stockdale was once asked who didn't make it out alive from POW camps. Stockdale said that was easy – the optimists. The reporter said: "I don't understand. I thought optimism got us through hard times." Stockdale answered: "The optimists all thought: We're going to get out. We're going to be out by Christmas. And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they said, We're going to be out by Easter. And Easter would come, and Easter would go. Then they'd say, We're going to be out by Thanksgiving. And then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart."

Who will not do well in this pandemic? The optimists! Those who believed this will be over by Easter. This is all going to all be over by April 30. We will have our graduation on May 15. We will definitely have our dream wedding in June. My business will reopen stronger than ever. We Christians are not optimists! And we're not pessimists, either, running around saying the sky is falling there is no hope. We Christians consider the brutal facts as they are. We look all the unpleasantness squarely in the eye, but then we say: "Nevertheless, we will prevail! We will win in the end!" We have set our hope on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Even death will not defeat us!

Ultimately, the reason we Christians can find hope in a suffering world is because we have a

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Glorious hope

Slide 1 Peter 1:7

⁷These 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 honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Our glorious hope is that those of us who have put our trust in the risen Christ will receive praise, glory and honor when Jesus returns.

I'll finish with this. My favorite Christian author, C.S. Lewis, wrote a wonderful essay years ago called "The Weight of Glory".

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Book cover

He talked about what it means that Christians will receive praise and glory and honor when we see Jesus.

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[Jesus said] no one can enter heaven except as a child; and nothing is so obvious in a child – not just in a conceited child but in a good child – as its great and undisguised pleasure at being praised. Not only in a child, either, even in a dog or a horse. The most childlike pleasure is to be praised by someone superior to ourselves.

We all desperately need to hear a “well done, good and faithful servant” from our Creator. You know, our hope is not just that you and I will get a “well done” from Jesus Christ. Lewis goes on to say that

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Glory means brightness, splendor, luminosity. We are going to shine like the sun... We do not merely want to see beauty... we want something else that can hardly be put into words – to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it.

In other words, one day the trials we’ve experienced in this life will pass away. We’ll not only see God’s glory, but his glory will shine in us and through us. We will be filled with God’s glory! There will be dark times ahead of us! But those of you who have entrusted your lives to Christ will one day shine like the sun. We will prevail! We will win! And we will be filled with the glory of God!

Gospel call.