

### **“High Hopes”**

“By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead ...”

If you Google the phrase “High Hopes,” chances are you will be directed to the old song by Sammy Cahn that was made famous by Frank Sinatra, which encourages listeners to consider *“just what makes that little old ant think he’ll move that rubber tree plant.”* The reason the ant has such confidence in the face of such insurmountable odds is simple: *“He’s got high hopes ... high apple pie in the sky hopes,”* and therefore *“any time you’re getting low, instead of letting go, just remember that ant – oops there goes another rubber tree plant!”*

But if you scroll down the page, you will come to another entry that shares the same name but has a very different perspective on hope. This “High Hopes” was written by Pink Floyd, which laments being *“encumbered forever by desire and ambition, there’s a hunger still unsatisfied. Our weary eyes still stray to the horizon, though down this road we’ve been so many times.”* For this singer, “high hopes” are not a source of confidence in the face of present obstacles but a distant memory of something that no longer exists; these high hopes were in days when *“the grass was greener, the light was brighter, with friends surrounded the nights of wonder.”*

*High Hopes.* Is hope a present reality, or something in our long-forgotten past that we may never experience again? This is the question with which the people to whom the First Letter of Peter is addressed are struggling. The Apostle addresses them as *“the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia”* (1:1). According to Acts, Jews from these places were among those who heard Peter’s sermon in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:9), and it is likely that Christianity was brought to Asia Minor by these first converts. These Jewish Christians would be joined by Gentile Christians to form the Christian churches scattered throughout the primarily rural Roman provinces in northeastern Asia Minor. Peter addresses them as “exiles” not because they have been displaced from their homelands (like the Jewish exiles in Babylon in the Sixth Century B.C.), but because the diverse community they had formed differed greatly from their neighbors. The author is also an exile, in his case a physical one; Peter writes the letter from Rome (which he refers to in 5:13 as “Babylon,” using the term from Revelation that refers to it as an enemy of God’s people). While there is no evidence of any empire-wide or local governmental persecution of Christians living in the Roman provinces of Asia at this time, Christians who were not citizens (and this may be the majority of the Christians in this region) were vulnerable to abusive treatment by their neighbors and by local authorities.

- “As resident aliens and visiting foreigners they were culturally and religiously different from the majority population. They paid taxes and contributed to the local economy, but they could not inherit property, and they were denied the legal protections that citizens enjoyed.” – Judith Jones.

For these Christians who were considered aliens and exiles, *“a slandered minority ... strangers in a strange land”* (David Bartlett), people whose “high hopes” were more likely a distant memory than a present source of strength, the First Letter of Peter is written as a letter of encouragement. This *“Apostle of Jesus Christ”* addresses them not only as “exiles” but as people *“who have been chosen and*

*destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood.” (1:2). As God has chosen people with a purpose for generations, these “exiles” in Asia Minor have been chosen is to be “obedient to Jesus Christ,” which is the mark of discipleship (“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.” – Matthew 7:24). What makes such obedience possible is the gift of Christ’s blood that was shed on the Cross for the sake of all humanity (“These are the ones who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb.” – Revelation 7:14). It is through this obedient life of discipleship to the crucified Christ that “grace and peace [may] be yours in abundance.”*

Letters of this time often opened with thanksgivings or blessings, and in his opening the Apostle includes themes that will be addressed in the body of the letter. God is praised for the ways in which Christians have been elected and redeemed. In the face of distress and suffering, what God’s mercy provides is “new birth” and “living hope”:

- “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” – 1:3-5.

God has given God’s people a sense of belonging, an inheritance, and the honor that their society has denied them. They have been “reborn” into God’s own family; *“Through the resurrection of Jesus, God has given them a new life in the present and the promise of salvation and an eternal home when Jesus is revealed.”* (Jones). This being “born anew” is what Jesus proclaimed to Nicodemus in John’s Gospel:

- “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above ... no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” – John 3:3, 5.

The word translated “born from above” (*anōthen*) has a double meaning that is only possible in New Testament Greek; it means both “from above” and “again.” To be “born *anōthen*” speaks both of a time of birth (“again”) and the place from which this new birth is generated (“from above”). The new birth of which Jesus speaks gives new access to God. It is through our baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection that God has given us new life in the present and an eternal home in the fullness of time:

- “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For is we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” – Romans 6:3-5.

Those who have been “born anew” through their baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection have also been born anew into a “living hope.” Unlike hope that is based solely on human events and circumstances which may or may not come to fruition, this “living hope” is rooted in God’s steadfast love and faithfulness, and is therefore a hope that *“never ceases, [God’s] mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”* (Lamentations 3:22-23). “Living hope” is not mere wishful thinking, nor is it hope that is solely based on our confidence in the actions of other human beings.

- “Hope lives because it is based on Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, his triumph over death. Hope lives because death cannot overcome it. Hope lives because even in the face of tribulation it does not back down or grow faint. Living hope is hope that gives life... this ‘living hope’ is a hope that now power can destroy, tarnish, or mar.” – Bartlett.

What can keep believers steadfast while they await their heavenly inheritance is faith, the confidence that believers have a treasure laid up for them in heaven that neither moth nor rust can corrupt. *“God’s actions in the past and God’s promises for the future have transformed their lives in the present.”* (Jones). Because of this gift of God’s “living hope” and despite all odds, Christians are to find joy even in difficult circumstances. Those to whom this letter has been addressed have experienced the scorn and harassment of their neighbors and local society that sees them as worthless and has stripped them of everything that gave them a sense of value and identity. While the Apostle does not minimize the suffering they are enduring (because Peter himself would ultimately be martyred for this Christian faith), he encourages God’s people to *“rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials”* (1:6). This “little while” reminds the faithful that their present difficulties are made relative by God’s eternal promises. Their suffering is neither permanent, nor is it meaningless, for through it *“the genuineness of your faith – being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”* (1:7). Their sharing in Christ’s sufferings will become a testimony to others of the genuineness of their faith even as it results in praise and thanksgiving when the fullness of God’s love in Jesus Christ is revealed:

- “For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.” – 2 Corinthians 4:11-12.

Although the fullness of Christ’s glory is yet to be revealed, those who are reborn to a living hope even now have the privilege of loving Christ, being faithful to Christ, and rejoicing in him. They are those to whom the risen Christ addresses his beatitude that *“blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe”* (John 20:29); for *“although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”* (1:8-9). Future generations can experience the joy of the first disciples who *“rejoiced when they saw the Lord.”* (John 20:20).

- “It stands as a pledge and promise to later generations that they, too, will experience the grace of God in Jesus ... Jesus’ care for the faith of those who come after Thomas, who will not see, is equally without limit and measure.” – Gail O’Day.

In the First Letter of Peter, the Christian promise has three elements:

1. The inheritance that is ours when we through Baptism *“we are reborn children of God and made members of the Church, the body of Christ”* (ELW Holy Baptism) is being kept safe in heaven for God’s children.
2. The glorious revelation and judgment of Christ will be accomplished when Christ *“comes again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.”* (Nicene Creed).
3. The salvation that is present for believers now as they await the last day.

It needs to be noted that when Peter refers to *“the salvation of your souls”* (*psyche*), he is using the word “soul” in the context of New Testament teaching that does not distinguish the soul from the body

("body-soul dualism" is a concept with roots in Greek philosophy) but uses "soul" to refer to the person, the salvation of the self.

Our worth comes not from human opinions, but from the God who has claimed us as God's own people and blessed us with a new birth into a living hope through our baptism into the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our hope, therefore, is not rooted in human resources or human abilities but is a hope that rests on the promises of God that are always *"trustworthy and true."* (Revelation 21:6). Because of God's great faithfulness to God's people, because we have the "blessed assurance" that God is *"our help in ages past, our hope for years to come; our shelter from the stormy blast and our eternal home"* (ELW Hymn 632), a key element of our inheritance as children of God is *"strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow"* because *"great is thy faithfulness."* (ELW Hymn 733).

- "The resurrection of Christ provides hope for the future and strength for the present. Christ risen from the dead is both the guarantor of final glory for the faithful and the ground for present Christian joy – even in suffering... Then and now it is finally by faith that we lay hold of the promise that provides hope for our final end and joy for the days to come." – Bartlett.

The source of our "high hopes" is not in our own outlook or perspective; they are grounded in the good news that is ours in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Our hope is a "living hope" because it comes to us through our living Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the Easter proclamation the "Christ the Lord is risen! He is Risen indeed! Alleluia!", and therefore *"because I live, you also will live."* (John 14:19). No matter if our "high hopes" are a present reality or a distant memory, no matter if our lives are filled with light or shrouded in darkness, we live in the midst of a "living hope" that is with us at all times and in all places because the promise of our crucified and risen Lord and Savior is that *"remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."* (Matthew 28:20).

- "This newness is a gift in baptism. It is recovered each Easter in faith in the resurrection, each Lord's Day as the sun of the new creation bursts in upon the old, with each concrete return to and recall of the faith which was baptism's gift, and in the joy of forgiveness. Such newness moves bodily out into the world; it enters into the real world, not just some spiritual, abstract, chimerical world. How one acts then becomes decisively important – if the Name is to be known and honored. Faith becomes active in love; love means complete devotion to God and then, as Augustine would say, freedom to 'do as you please' in His service." – Martin Marty, *Baptism*.

It turns out that there is a nothing song named "High Hopes" that shares neither the sunny optimism of Frank Sinatra's nor the brooding despair of Pink Floyd's. Bruce Springsteen's song focuses on a hope that comes from above, from outside of the person, a hope that people of faith recognize as being the answer to our prayers to our Lord who dwells on high:

- "Give me help, give me strength, give a soul a night of fearless sleep. Give me love, give me peace, don't you know these days you pay for everything. High hopes – I've got high hopes!"

Yes, we've got high hopes, rooted in our faith in our risen Lord Jesus Christ. We've got high hopes, because God's steadfast love dwells with us forever. We've got high hopes because *"I have set the LORD always before me; because God is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken."* (Psalm 16:8).

We've got high hopes – thanks be to God through our crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.