

Following the Risen Jesus: What is this salvation?

Last week we celebrated Easter. It is my favorite Sunday of the whole year. The fact that Jesus is alive is true every single day, but on Easter we proclaim it especially loudly. We get excited and we are filled with hope. It was fun although different for sure. But now what? Monday we went back to the world of pandemic and uncertainty and fear. We had aftershocks reminding us of the earthquake potential that we are always standing on. Was Easter just a blip in an otherwise challenging world? Or is there more? Well, this week we are starting a new sermon series from the book of 1 Peter, Peter's first letter to the church that we have. It is not an often-studied letter. Most Christians latch on to other letters like Philippians or Romans or 1 Corinthians. Ask a room full of Christians to comment or expound on the letter of 1 Peter and the room will probably get pretty quiet. But this letter is worth looking at because it is one of the earliest letters on what it means to be a Christian in a challenging and mostly secular world. And let's face it, we are still Christians in a challenging and secular world. So, we are going to look at what this letter might say to the church today and what promises it has for us. So, let's start at the beginning, 1 Peter 1 chapter 1. Peter writes this:

Scripture: 1 Peter 1:1-9

“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, ² who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance. 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.”

This letter is one of the earliest Christian documents to address the question of how a Christian lives in a secular culture. Peter was addressing this question for Christians living in the Roman led government of Asia minor. And although the social context of Asia Minor in the first century was much different than our social context today, there is a lot of contemporary advice we can take from this letter as Christians here and now.

And since we are starting at the beginning of this letter I want to first offer a kind of introduction to the letter of 1 Peter as we begin this morning, just to help put it in perspective. Some of what we learn from this first part of this letter is very practical in nature. For one, it tells us who Peter is writing to. All of the provinces he mentions are part of northwestern Asia minor back then which is now modern-day Turkey. What this also tells us is that these Christians are probably mostly Gentiles that were exposed to Judaism first and then converted along with a mixing in of former Jews. Peter makes some Old Testament references which implies that his readers are expected to have some Old Testament knowledge. Peter knew who would be reading this letter. So,

this early church in northwest Asia minor is made up of a mix of Jews and Gentiles that have become Christians because of what they have heard about Jesus Christ. Yet Peter refers to them in Israel-like terms. At the beginning of this letter he calls them “elect” and “chosen.” This is Kingdom of God or people of God type of language was usually used to address the people of Israel. But this is the new Kingdom of God. This early church made up of a mix of people that, as we will discover later, are marginalized in some way, this early mix of people making up the church is how the new Kingdom of God is supposed to look.

In terms of timing, Peter probably wrote this letter at the beginning of the era of persecution under Nero. Since Peter was martyred around 65AD by Nero, this was probably written sometime between 62 and 65 AD. And yes, this was most likely written by Peter, the Peter we know from the ministry of Jesus. So, there are some of the basics about this letter. Who it was written to, when it was written, and who wrote it. Now what about the content of this letter? What is it about? Well. Peter’s letter seeks to answer an age-old question for Christians: How then should we live? In light of what Jesus Christ has done, in light of Easter (last week), how should we now live? And Peter has three main themes in this letter: Salvation, church, and the Christian life. Pastor Steve will take you down the roads of the church and the Christian life in the weeks to come. But today we look at the first part of this letter which addresses salvation.

Verses 1 and 2 give us our first clue about what Peter says about salvation. Those words that I pointed out before; “elect” and “chosen.” In other words, God initiates salvation. It was not our idea. God acts first. And that is the important thing to understand here. All too often people get caught up in the question of who does God not elect or choose. That is not for us to question. The story of the entire Bible, as Peter points out in this chapter, is that God has pursued us for all of human history. And the coming of Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of all of it. So you, me, anyone following Jesus Christ is doing so because God reached out first.

The next thing Peter says in verse 2 is that these believers have been chosen “through the sanctifying work of the Spirit.” In other words, God’s Spirit is at work on us before we even know it. Sanctification is a life-long process that begins before we are even aware of God’s grace. And it is a life-long process of being made holy. Being made more and more like God until it is finished in the presence of God. One commentator put it this way: “Sanctification is God’s gracious act of turning sinners into God’s people.” It is a process that happens because of the work of God’s Spirit in the world.

And then Peter says these chosen people that are being sanctified by God’s Spirit are “to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood.” In other words, they have been chosen and sanctified for the purpose of being obedient to Jesus. That is why we are saved. All of this work Jesus has done is so that we might be obedient to God. The law was not enough. We couldn’t obey the law, but now we are obedient because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Thus, verses 1 and 2 are about the foundation of our salvation, which is conversion. That God initiates it, it is by the power of God’s Spirit, and it is thanks to the blood of Jesus Christ that we can now seek to be obedient. The rest of this section, verses 3 to 9 and beyond, is about salvation. We have the foundation of our salvation, now we learn about salvation. And this section is a giant run on sentence. English teachers everywhere are probably disturbed by this passage. But Peter very eloquently says what is true about salvation. Before Peter can spend the rest of the letter on how to live as a Christian, he needs to be sure we understand what it means to be saved. The foundation of salvation is where he starts and I think this is important for us too. What does it mean that we are saved? Last week Pastor Steve helped us look at the truth and reality of Easter. This week I

want to ask you what does Easter mean? Because if we don't understand salvation, we don't understand the foundation of the church.

So, beginning at verse 3 Peter writes "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." Peter praises God, and praise is where we should always start. Peter starts by praising God because God has shown mercy which has resulted in new birth and caused living hope. God's mercy on sinners, in sending Jesus to die and rise again, has changed our status before God. Before we were just sinners but now we are regenerated. New birth. We have a new chance. And that gives us a living hope. Not a past hope. A living hope because Jesus himself is alive.

Then Peter explains three things that are aspects of salvation and I want to look at each of these. Peter spells out inheritance, joy in suffering, and responding by loving Jesus. Inheritance, suffering, and loving Jesus. First let's look at inheritance. What is an inheritance? Well, it is a benefit that you get from someone that came before you. It is not something you earn. It is a loving gift. Some of you may remember this story that I have told before. I am adopted. I was not born into the Myers family. I was adopted by my now parents and given the Myers name. And when I was still very young my Aunt and Uncle went to my grandparents and expressed their concern about my being included in the will. They did not want me included in my grandparent's will because I was not a real Myers. They did not want me to get an inheritance I had not been born into. Well, thankfully my grandparents understood adoption in the biblical sense and not on the level that my Aunt and Uncle did. As far as my grandparents were concerned I was completely adopted into the family. I was one of them and would receive all the benefits that came with that.

And this is how God sees us. When we become followers of Christ we are adopted into the family of God and we receive a full inheritance. Back in the first century only the oldest son got a full inheritance. So Peter is blowing everyone's mind when he says all the children of God get a full inheritance. And on top of that this inheritance cannot perish, spoil, or fade. It can't be taken away. And it is kept in heaven for us. So what is this inheritance? It is a completed salvation and eternal life in the kingdom of God. A completed salvation. You remember earlier I mentioned sanctification, the life-long process of being made holy? Well, the end point is completed salvation. That is our inheritance. And that is the first thing Peter wants us to know about salvation. It is an inheritance that will be received in the kingdom of God by God's children.

Then, in verse 6 Peter writes "In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials." These Christians Peter was writing to were suffering and experiencing grief. Suffering, now there is something we can relate to right now. We see suffering right now. And grief, that is really something we can relate to right now. All of us are grieving a variety of things right now. Just this week I put an article on grief on our website. Check it out, because all of us are grieving. Grief happens whenever there is loss. We typically associate grief with the loss of a person, but it actually happens when we lose anything we were holding as important or significant. So, in this current environment people are losing jobs, losing the old way of life, losing routines, missing connections with people, and missing significant events like weddings and funerals and baby showers and graduations. Seniors in high school are losing all the landmarks of that last year such as proms and graduation ceremonies and parties. We can relate to grieving right now.

However, I think the suffering that Peter referred to when addressing the grieving early church was suffering that was the result of their faith. Their choice to follow Jesus and live differently was causing backlash. Now does our choice to be followers of Jesus really cause us backlash? Do we really suffer for our faith? In other

parts of the world people truly do suffer for their faith. Our Pakistani members know a lot about suffering for being a Christian in a non-Christian governed country. But do we know what it means to suffer for our faith? I think we honestly have it pretty easy for two reasons. One, we live in a culture that prides itself on toleration and political correctness. We are blessed to live in a space where we can be Christians and not persecuted. That is a blessing. And we should be thankful for that every day and not take it for granted. But the other reason we don't suffer for our faith may be that we don't live it out fervently enough. One commentator questioned, shouldn't the gospel generate more sparks than it does? That is something to us to think about as a church.

But I want to be careful about how we relate to this section on suffering and grief. Because we are not suffering in the ways that the churches in Asia minor were. And to imply that we understand the suffering of a church under the rule of Nero would be diminishing and unfair. However, we are experiencing grief right now and Peter encourages us to be joyful in the midst of that grief. Why? Because it can actually draw us closer to God. One commentator put it this way. "Peter sees in suffering a situation from which the believers can learn and grow." So yes, things are hard right now. So how might we grow in our relationship with God where we didn't before?

This is a great question. How can we draw closer to God in a time of challenge? Can we as Christians see the pandemic as an opportunity at the same time as we see it as hugely challenging? According to Peter the answer is yes. Yes things are challenging, yes we are grieving losses, but we can be joyful because it is also creating new ministry opportunities and is also an opportunity for us to lean on God more than we normally do, and we should lean on God all the time. Sometimes it takes a pandemic and an earthquake for us to realize it.

So things we have learned about our salvation, that it is an inheritance, and it means we can have joy in suffering and grief. The third thing we learn about salvation is that our response should be to love Jesus. Look at verse 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." The response to salvation, the response to Easter should be to love Jesus, even though we don't see him.

So what does this message about salvation, the first of the three themes in Peter's letter, mean for us? Well, proclaiming the message that people need to be saved may be as difficult in this day as it was in Peter's. We may not be in jeopardy of crucifixion for it, but we face other challenges. We face a culture that is pluralistic where everything is supposed to be accepted as ok. No one wants to be told that they need to be saved. That salvation is necessary. That is not a popular message this day in age. And churches struggle with the idea of being unpopular. We worry about what people might think if we say salvation is necessary. And as J. Jeremias puts it: "And so we settle for the kind of friendliness within which all absolutes perish either for lack of interest or because of the demands of the social etiquette." The problem is...that is not the job of the church. Our job is not to be socially accepted. Our job is to proclaim the truth and lead people to Jesus because they do need to be saved. And I think that is Peter's message to us following Easter. Talk about salvation. Proclaim the message of salvation. Our pluralistic and suffering world needs this message. Jesus offers salvation and the world needs to know it. That is the task before us in the shadow of Easter. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.