

**First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)**  
**Dr. Barry M. Foster**  
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### **The Hope of Perfection**

1 Peter 1:13-21 (NIV)

*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. 14 As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. 15 But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; 16 for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.”*

*17 Since you call on a Father who judges each person’s work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear. 18 For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. 20 He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. 21 Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.*

**[Slide 1]**     *Opening*

Good morning church!

We’re continuing the series I’ve titled, “*Resurrection Hope*,” as we walk through the book of 1 Peter, asking the questions: What does it mean to live in hope? And what does it look like to live as people who have what our text today calls “*a living hope*”?

**[Slide 2]**     *Review*

So far, we’ve seen that Peter refers to this “*living hope*” as an “*inheritance*,” which he says is ours because of the resurrection. Let’s remember what the Bible means by “*hope*”: “*the confident expectation of future good which is not yet here, but is certain to come.*” Our hope is based on something that God has promised, which is therefore certain, and which gives us the confidence that we may rightly expect it in the future; it is our coming eternal inheritance.

**[Slide 3]**

Last week, we learned that one of the reasons that we experience pain and suffering in this life is to purify our faith and certify it as genuine. Peter refers to these experiences as “*trials*,” ordeals we endure in order to gain that certification of having been tested and proven genuine. And what we gain is not only the

inheritance God promised, but the praise of God for having kept the faith. God promises to honor his people by glorifying us before all of creation. That future glory is also part of our hope.

We also saw that Peter identifies this hope as our salvation: a future salvation that will be revealed when Jesus returns, which is promised to us on the condition of our faith, our allegiance to Jesus Christ, something that our text this morning reiterates.

**[Slide 4]**     *Introduction*

But even though this passage in 1 Peter highlights the future aspect of our hope—something that will come to us when Jesus returns—the point of emphasis is not simply on the future. Having hope is not characterized by just longing for the future to come. Having hope means taking hold of the future and bringing it into the present in a way that radically affects who I am, how I live, and what I do. Having a hope means that I am grasping something that is not yet, holding onto it mentally and emotionally, so that I live in the present in a way that assures that I will arrive at that destination. It is the marker on the map that shows me where it is I am going, the goal of my journey. Knowing my goal helps me choose the right path and helps me keep to that path. My hope is the destination, but it shapes everything about what I do on my journey.

**[Slide 5]**

For that matter, we can't restrict ourselves to just the future and the present. This passage moves back and forth from the future to the past and to the present. And we have to clearly understand how that all fits together if we want to realize all of the benefits of what Peter is saying to the churches.

Let's start by noticing how this passage connects to what came before and what will come after—its context in the overall letter that Peter wrote to the churches of western Asia.

**[Slide 6]**     *Literary context*

This short portion of Peter's opening section—just two paragraphs long—directly builds upon what we read in the past two weeks. As we just reviewed a moment ago, Peter opened by drawing his readers' attention to this hope that belongs to all Christians—the hope of an eternal inheritance and of receiving honor and vindication from God as a consequence of maintaining faith in Jesus Christ until he returns, when salvation will be fully and finally realized.

The rest of the letter will consist mostly of instruction and exhortation—a lot of explanation about how we should live, the reasons why we should live that way, and urgent appeals for us to do so. All of those instructions and exhortations are

grounded in truths and principles that Peter lays out for us, especially what he has mentioned in his opening section.

These two paragraphs, then, serve as a transition from the opening prayer to the rest of the letter. So we get the first “therefore,”—showing us that the apostle wants us to understand the consequences of what he has been saying—and the first set of commands and exhortations (which will be followed by quite a few more over the course of the rest of the letter). In a sense, this passage serves as a picture of the whole letter in microcosm—understanding how what God has done in the past connects to our hope in the future, and how those two sets of truths impact and govern our lives in the present.

[Slide 7] *The exhortation to “be holy”*

In this first set of commands, what leaps off the page at us are these two words: “*Be holy!*” The very sound of the words when we utter them out loud makes us quiver just a bit. But notice: this exhortation is *directly connected*, very closely connected, to this *hope* that Peter says is ours, and to the *basis for that hope*. The exhortation—which is directed at us in our present, is very closely tied to the future and to the past. And not just in a general sense that time is connected. No, the Scripture here is teaching us something quite particular: our future hope is based on a concrete reality that happened in the past, which will result in future good that comes to us from God. Our expectation of that future good, on the basis of what has happened in the past, is intended to motivate and direct us in the present as we live between the times.

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But why? Why does God connect this command/exhortation to “be holy” to this hope of salvation that is ours through our faith in what Jesus Christ did on the cross for us?

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The reason—or at least, one important reason—is this: Without that connection of future and past to our present, without the connection of our hope and the basis for that hope to this directive, the exhortation to “be holy” becomes a crushing weight of impossibility. It becomes an “*ought to*,” a “*you must*,” that brutalizes us with its unyielding demands that are beyond my reach. “*Be holy?*” I simply cannot. Despair in the face of certain failure is all that I can grasp.

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But when I grasp hold of hope, a certain expectation of future good that comes to me from the hand of a God who cannot lie and who always keeps his word, a hope that is based upon the victory over sin and the grave that he

demonstrated when he gave his Son to die for my sins in my place, and raised him from the dead; when I grasp that and hold on to it like a drowning man clings to a life preserver; then I'm not ruled by despair. Then, the exhortation sounds completely different to my ears and to my heart. Because my hope shows me a destination—and my journey matches that destination. My salvation, my being rescued, is moving me toward that destination. So the journey is one of becoming holy. God saved me in order to help me get there.

[Slide 11]

I have to tell you that I wrestled with the title of this sermon more than you would think (and not just because I always obsess over getting the right words—as shocking as that is). No, I was concerned that some of you, maybe many of you, would immediately react to the title, “The Hope of Perfection,” by starting down that path to failure and despair. But here’s what I want you to know: The command or exhortation to “be holy” hides a secret, two secrets, actually: (1) The idea of perfection has to do with becoming *fully developed*, mature—ripe, if you will. Yes, it involves moral purity of mind, heart, and life. But the point is that this is a matter of becoming, developing, maturing into what we have been born to be. (More about that in two weeks.) (2) Remember, we don’t hold to “high jump theology.” The vision of becoming perfect is not given to us to cause us to despair but to help us see where we’re going. It is the marker that reminds us where the path is supposed to be taking us, so that we make sure we’re on the right path. And we’re right back to last week’s emphasis on the point of testing—Peter is building on that foundation he laid out at the start of the letter. Testing isn’t designed to disqualify us and prove us to be failures (“high jump theology”), but to certify our faith as genuine.

[Slide 12] *The significance of the past*

I mentioned a bit ago that this passage moves back and forth between events in the past and expectations of the future and the concerns for the present. Let’s begin by seeing what it has to say about the past. Peter’s language is specific to these mostly Gentile, mostly younger believers. But let’s apply it to us, since it is God’s word not just to them, but to us. Let’s think about the past in terms of its relation to us: what I have done, what was the case, what has happened.

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Peter first refers to their past as “*when you lived in ignorance*,” and characterizes that time as one that was notable for living according to evil desires. Do you recognize that about your own past? Do you recognize that your past failures were a combination of two factors: (a) your own self-centered choices that

were driven by evil desires; and (b) your own ignorance. Both of those things have shaped us, but they are different things.

The first of those two factors boils down to plain old, ordinary sin: greed, envy, lust, pride—it's all there. Self-centered choices driven by evil desires—the desires for pleasure, for power, for position. We take good desires and pervert them. We learn about corrupt things from others and develop taste buds for that which is not good. And we develop our own unique, individualized talents for becoming what the apostle Paul referred to as “inventors of evil.” All of us.

The second factor, though, is a function of our limitations, not of our corruption. We're just ignorant. We're ignorant of what is good, what is valuable, what is true. It's not a good place to be, because ignorance always costs a great deal, and causes a lot of pain. But the reasons we're ignorant include a lot of things that are beyond our control, such as the time and place of our birth, the culture in which we grow up, and the people who have the most influence over our surroundings and training.

When we think about these two factors, it's crucial that we think rightly. When it comes to our evil desires, we need to call them what they are and not excuse them or ourselves. Sin isn't cute. It isn't a matter for jokes and half-smiles, where we affirm one another as we acknowledge our common enjoyment of that which is damnable. Evil desires always lead to evil actions, and those evil actions always hurt people whom God made and loves and for whom he died. Don't excuse your past that was filled with evil desires—those sins weren't just the fruit of being young. They were the fruit of a heart that was turned in on itself, living only to fulfill its own lusts. Your nine-year old that breaks his ankle jumping off the roof because he's pretending to be training to be a ninja is just being young and foolish. Your nine-year old that breaks his ankle falling off the ladder because he's trying to steal money from the rainy-day jar is young and foolish, but he's also driven by evil desires. Don't excuse evil desires. Admit that they were (or are) sinful and that you were wrong to pursue them.

But don't beat yourself up because you were ignorant. Peter doesn't assign any blame to these Gentile believers for growing up as they did. They were idolaters; they lived in a highly immoral culture, and so probably followed the course that was laid out for them and presumed to be normal. They were ignorant of God and his ways, and Peter simply reminds them of that fact. But he does call them to remember that they have taken a decisive step away from that life by turning to Christ. They have started down a new path toward a different destination, leaving behind their life of ignorance and evil desires.

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Verse 18 points to the second thing Peter says about their past: he calls it “*an empty (or futile) life inherited from your ancestors.*” Every culture, every family, every group of people that has ever lived on this planet has passed down things to their descendants that are good, and noble, and true; they reflect God’s ways. It is a function of God’s common grace that there is something in every culture that corresponds to aspects of the kingdom of God and the nature of the Trinity. But every culture and family has also passed down things that do not reflect God’s ways. They are ignorant, foolish, vain, empty. They have no value. And ignorance always leads to futility. And whatever does not reflect the ways of God never stays neutral; it always leads to horrible ends. Petty jealousies become feuds that become endless tribal conflicts or gang turf wars. Lust becomes sexual deviance that becomes a system of human slavery and sexual trafficking.

Not every inheritance is a blessing. Some of the things you and I have inherited need to be tossed. In my family, divorce was rampant throughout both sides of my family tree. When Mary and I got married, we had to pray and break the power of that futile way of life that I had inherited. I remember an older member of the church where I was pastoring came to me after service one Sunday. In my sermon that day I had mentioned the ongoing problem of systemic sins, such as racism and prejudice. He had tears in his eyes, and he was stumbling, trying to find the words to tell me what he wanted to say: “*Pastor, we were taught those things; we didn’t know any better.*” He was doing his best to divest himself of those things he had learned, the things he had inherited from his parents and grandparents and all the rest of the people in his day. He had begun to recognize that what had been handed down to him wasn’t worth keeping. It was empty, without any value at all.

[Slide 15]

But that’s exactly where Peter wants us to see that there is something else in our past that matters, something else that has shaped us, something else that has genuine value—and that is the redemption of God. Our culture and our ancestors are not the only things affecting us from the past. God has also been active and influential; he has been effecting redemption for his people, from the very beginning of time and even before.

Christ was chosen, Peter says, before creation. The plan of God was already in place before anything existed other than God himself. He was revealed to the world in the past. For Peter’s first readers, it was only a matter of some decades—Jesus had come and lived among us within Peter’s lifetime. For us, it’s a

bit longer. But it's still there as a part of the historical record of human beings. Jesus' life, his death, and as Peter emphasizes, his resurrection, are keys in the past that we have to hold onto while we're letting go of the empty ways inherited from our ancestors. Jesus, the Son, chosen before time, revealed as Messiah, resurrected: that all equals redemption.

Redemption! What a great word. For the Gentiles who read this in the first century, they would have immediately thought of the process for gaining your freedom from slavery. For a price, you could purchase your freedom, or someone could do it for you. Your life and status immediately changed by being redeemed from slavery. For the Jews who read this, they would have immediately thought of a similar picture—God's act of delivering them from slavery in Egypt, what we celebrated just a few weeks ago when we read about the Passover. For both Jews and Gentiles, the word-picture powerfully communicated the ideas of personal freedom, obtained at a great cost, allowing me a chance for a new life instead of being trapped forever in despair and hopelessness. It was a perfect picture of salvation—the hope for which we are waiting.

[Slide 16] *The expectation of the future*

The picture of redemption brings us back to the future, if you will. Once again, Peter emphasizes that our salvation, the fulfillment and completion of our redemption, will be realized when Jesus is revealed upon his return to rule over this planet. Our hope—our expectation of future good—is ultimately tied up in the coming of the kingdom of God, not just the coming of nicer days or more comfortable lives.

What are you expecting when Jesus returns? (I suppose we should ask first of all, “*Are you expecting Jesus to return?*” Are you looking forward to that event?) What are we expecting? Peter doesn't focus on the details of that event, but sums it up by referring to “*the grace to be brought to you,*”—the realization of salvation. Our expectation is this (if we belong to Christ)—his return will bring joy and deliverance for his people. Jesus will begin to govern this world directly, and that will mean deliverance from evil, the establishment of true justice, and genuine peace and freedom.

But there is a flip side to this picture, which Peter also points out. For the return of Christ will bring something else for his enemies—those who refused to let him rule over them. For them, his return will be a day of terror and judgment.

One of the things that the Bible consistently and repeatedly points out is that God is the utterly sovereign and absolutely impartial judge. He cannot be bribed. He doesn't work out deals. He is perfect in all his ways, including his judgments.

Perfectly righteous, perfectly just, perfectly consistent, perfectly merciful, and perfectly wise. His judgments will be just.

That means he can be trusted. No one is getting away with anything. No crimes are going unpunished. God will judge righteously—and it will all be on the basis of what we have done. Each of us will face him, and each of us will answer for our lives. And as the Bible also consistently and repeatedly points out, there will be wrath and condemnation as the certain penalties for sin. One of two outcomes will take place. For those who have put their trust in Jesus Christ, the wrath and judgment that you were due have been borne by Jesus on the cross, and there is now no condemnation. For everyone else, you will bear it yourself.

[Slide 17] *How we live in the present in light of the past and the future*

Those two starkly different outcomes are laid before us by Peter, for a very simple but profound purpose. We are supposed to live in the present with the full weight of both the past and the future shaping our decisions and choices. Our passage spells out five key things for us to do in light of what has happened in the past, and what we are expecting in the future.

[Slide 18]

(1) *Know the truth.* The reason Peter has spelled this all out for us is so that we begin with the truth. We start with actual, factual knowledge, based on the word of God. For us to live rightly as God’s people in this world, in this time, we have to live lives that are built on truth, not on fairy tales or imaginative ideals or romantic illusions. We need to recognize that apart from Christ, the things we have learned and inherited from our culture and our families, at least in terms of spiritual life and godliness, are essentially empty, futile, without value. We need to recognize the true value of redemption, of what we have in Christ. We need to understand the certainty of our hope, what we are expecting—both the judgment and the salvation that await us.

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(2) From that starting point, Peter says that our stance should be one of mental preparation. Put your mind in a proper place; *prepare yourself mentally* and emotionally so that you are ready to take the right actions. The two expressions in verse 13 are both powerful word-pictures.

The first expression, which the NIV translates as having “*minds that are alert*,” conveys the idea of getting prepared to work. ESV translates it, “*preparing your minds for action*.” Those of you who are familiar with the old King James version may have heard it like this: “*gird up the loins of your mind*.” The expression in the original language pictures a workman, who is dressed in a

sleeveless tunic, grabbing the hem of his tunic, and tucking it into his belt that is around his hips or waist, so that his legs are now free and he can do his work more easily. *Get ready to work!* is the message. Prepare yourself for action.

The second expression, “*be sober*” or “*with minds that are . . . fully sober,*” contrasts two states: sobriety and inebriation. Instead of being confused, uncertain, drunk, and unable to think clearly, Peter says that our minds should be sharp, well-trained, properly governed and controlled so that we make wise decisions and can carry them out.

As believers with a hope that is certain, and a faith that is founded on the God’s redemption, we ought to have our minds focused on the things that will make us more like Christ, not on emptiness, vain imaginations, or evil desires. I caught myself the other day—it wasn’t some horrible sin. I was just out walking and exploring a new area, which happened to have some really huge mansions. And I began to play the “*If I suddenly got a lot of money, what would I do with it*” game. Again, not a horrible sin, and not necessarily even a bad thing to do. But it was mostly vain imagination that didn’t help my heart get set right, or help me set my hope right. Don’t keep dwelling on sinful desires from your past—God has delivered you from them. He’s taken you out of that world. Leave it and those desires behind and move on. Focus on what is ahead, and on what it cost to procure that future for you.

Our final three keys I’m going to treat a bit more quickly, partly because I’m running out of time, but more importantly, because Peter is going to return to these themes in later chapters. So we’ll take them up again in the next sermon series when we can give them more attention.

[Slide 20]

(3) The third key for living in the present is this: *choose to obey God*. Choose to live according to his word, no matter what it costs you in this life. Choose to obey his ways, even when they conflict with what you were taught as a child, or with what the people around you think, or with what you think. Let your obedience be sincere, not just outward, but inward and wholehearted. Choose obedience to God. It’s not a straightjacket to confine you as a way of punishing you. It’s a straightjacket to confine you to keep you from destroying yourself and others around you.

[Slide 21]

(4) The fourth key is *be holy in your conduct* (NIV: “*in all you do*”). Sometimes, you’ll hear someone say something like this, “*Yeah, I know I didn’t do what I was supposed to do, but in my heart I wanted to do what was right. I*

*treated that man like he was a piece of garbage, but in my heart, I still loved him.”* Peter doesn’t tell us that it’s enough to be holy in our intentions. He says, *‘be holy in all that you do,’* in all your conduct. In the old comic strip, “Calvin and Hobbes,”—still one of the very best ever, if not the best comic strip of all time, in my opinion—Calvin and his stuffed tiger, Hobbes, are discussing what constitutes genuinely good actions. Calvin is trying to understand whether it involves just having the right attitude (the “heart”), whether or not you follow through with those intentions, or if an action can be good even if your intention is questionable. Hobbes’ answer is brilliant: *“I think that your actions demonstrate what is in your heart.”* Peter would agree, I think. We are called to live holy lives—in our habits, our actions, our lifestyles—because that is the path that leads to our destination of becoming perfect, fully developed. That is the hope to which we are going.

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(5) The final key that Peter offers us for how to live in the present is this: *live to please the Father.* Recognize that you belong to a different kingdom. You’re an alien here, a foreigner who is passing through this world and its systems, someone who is going to stand out because you aren’t following after all of the things that everyone else has set their hearts on. You’re not focused on obtaining as much as you can. You’re not seeking comfort or pleasure or the fulfillment of your dreams. You’re not living to acquire fame, or possessions, or status. You’re not craving celebrity status, so you aren’t enamoured by those who have it. You’re not here to become famous, or to be appreciated, or to be seen as important. You’re living for an audience of One—the Father who judges impartially. His affirmation and approval are what you seek, not the ever-changing, fickle, and vacuous applause of the crowds.

[Slide 23] *Conclusion*

Past, future, present—they’re all connected. And how they’re connected is part of the key for understanding and for living well, for becoming perfect (fully developed). Our own past has shaped us, our selfish choices and our ignorance. But God’s actions in the past have given us a basis for salvation; he has brought us redemption through Jesus, the Messiah chosen before the foundation of the world, and revealed him to the world as Savior and Lord by raising him from the dead. The future is yet to come, but our hope is certain because of God’s promise. We know that Jesus is returning, and that judgment is waiting. But we have a hope, an inheritance of salvation, a destination, if you will. So in the meantime, while we are on this journey through a land that doesn’t quite fit us anymore, now that we have been born again, we are marching toward that Celestial City, like Pilgrim.

We are in the process of becoming fully perfect, fully developed, complete, as we walk toward that destination.

So Peter reminds us, *“Make sure you’re on the right path. Hold onto that hope and continue on the path that leads to salvation. It’s marked by knowing the truth, preparing your mind for action, choosing to obey, being holy in all your conduct, and living to please the Father. It’s the path that leads to perfection.”*

[Slide 24]

*Transition to communion*

*[Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . . ]*

We are about to take communion, the reminder that we once lived in ignorance and evil desires, the reminder that we still need God’s grace.

Communion is the reminder that the only way for any of us to become perfect, to be holy, is through faith in Jesus. So we reaffirm our faith in him, with bread and cup. If you have a piece of bread and some grape juice, or something that can stand in for them, go ahead and get them now, and set them aside for a moment.

The worship team is going to lead us in a hymn that reflects on the love of God that sent Jesus to the cross for you and me. Let me encourage you to sing along with us, and to turn that hymn into a prayer that you can use to reaffirm your faith in Christ, or to make your confession of faith for the first time. And the promise of God is this: if you sincerely repent of your sins and invite Jesus to be your Lord; if you confess that he is the Son of God who died in your place, to pay the price for your sins, then he will come in to your heart and live in you through his Spirit. You’ll be born again. You’ll have a new hope, a living hope. So use this song to make your prayer to God. After we’re done singing, we’ll finish by taking the elements together.

[END]