

1 Peter 1:1-2 (1)

Where there's life, there's hope! That was an ancient Roman saying, but it's one that you still hear quoted today in certain quarters. I suppose it's like most one liners, it has an element of truth in it but no guarantee of certainty. As Warren Wiersbe says: 'It is not the fact of life that determines hope, but the faith of life.' According to verse 3 a Christian believer has a living hope in his heart because his faith and hope are anchored in the living God, you find that in 1:21. I think I would rephrase the old adage to read like this: where there's Christ, there's hope! That, to me, is the essence of Peter's first epistle. I know there are a handful of people in every situation who pour cold water on such an idea; I have met such folk, and you probably have as well, they laugh at the notion and they pooh-pooh the whole concept, they scorn the comfort and triumph of Peter's letter as unpractical theology. It seems to me, his answers are answers of faith. Peter knows that his witness is true, he feels it in his bones that Jesus Christ is real. He has tasted that the Lord is so good, and that his goodness will not fail. The old apostle says as much in his parting shot in 5:12 when he winds down with a resounding challenge: 'This is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it!' It is quite amazing, that's not only how Peter ended the letter, it's how he started it as well! He focused on the grace of God in his greeting to the believers in verses 1 and 2. I think it is important for us to realise that a Christian greeting is so much more than a mere formality. They are not just empty words or nice sounding sentiments. They are more! It is true to say that early Christians did use a common greeting when they were in touch with one another, they would often rehearse the words: 'wish you joy', you find traces of that in James 1:1 and Acts 15:23. But Peter, Paul and John salute the church with greetings that become blessings; if you like, a wish for joy becomes an apostolic pronouncement of grace. The Old Testament form of this blessing is on the lips of David when he said in 2 Samuel 2:6, 'may the Lord now show you kindness and

faithfulness.’ When we fast forward to the pages of the New Testament, it heightens the meaning of God’s mercy and grace. Grace, as we all know, signifies God’s love in action in Jesus Christ on behalf of sinners. That raises a vital question in our minds: what makes a greeting a blessing? Well, I believe Peter gives the answer in the words that immediately precede his blessing. Basically, it is all down to the work of the Holy Spirit. When the Lord’s servant pronounces a blessing on a gathered congregation at the end of a service of worship, it is the action of God’s Spirit that gives power to his words. As someone has said: ‘Grace is a gift, God is the giver.’ You see, our words of blessing have no magical powers in them; in actual fact, they do not communicate grace by their own power, nor do they do it because a man of the cloth happens to utter them. What takes place is this: when such words of blessing are spoken in faith to the people of God, God significantly honours it. They are much more than wishes; they are more, even, than prayers. They declare God’s own favour toward those who are in Christ. Coupled with grace in this apostolic blessing-cum-greeting is ‘peace.’ Grace transforms the customary greeting of the Greeks; peace gives new meaning to shalom, the traditional salutation of the Hebrews. We read in Numbers 6:26 the Aaronic blessing which the priests of the old economy pronounced on God’s ancient people: ‘The Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace.’ Those of us who are familiar with Jewish history will remember that Israel forfeited that blessing of peace and brought upon itself many decades of captivity in the land of exile. But the prophets foresaw a better day on the horizon when God would deliver his people, not only from their oppressors, but from their sins, you find echoes of that in Micah 7:14-20. The great evangelical prophet Isaiah anticipates the dawning of a new day when God himself would be the Saviour of the people, you find that nugget of truth in 26:12 and it is also strongly hinted at in the familiar portion in 9:6. I find it thrilling to realise that Simon Peter, the big burly fisherman from northern Galilee, knew the Prince of Peace of whom the ancient prophets

spoke. You will recall, in the upper room at the last supper, and again after the resurrection, Jesus had blessed the petrified disciples with his peace. That peace was not the political peace that the people expected the Messiah to bring. The world, Jesus said, could not give it or take it away! You find that in John 14:27 and 16:33. The Messiah's peace was given in the shadow of the cross of Calvary. Jesus gave his peace not only in spite of the cross, but because of the cross. What transpired was this: by his atoning death, Jesus bore the judgment of God's just wrath and made peace not only between Jew and Gentile, but between a holy God and sinful man. In that sense, Peter's relatively short greeting, for it's only a handful of words, gives in miniature the entire message of his letter. He says with characteristic warmth and sincerity: 'Grace and peace be yours in abundance.' This is tremendous! Peter writes the way he does because he has been there himself and he knows what the peace of God is all about. Times have changed for Peter, for it wasn't that many years before when he attempted to defend the shalom of the Messiah; you'll recall, it was under the gnarled olive trees in the garden of Gethsemane that he drew his sword to resist those who came to arrest the Lord Jesus. He got his comeuppance on that occasion but he learned a gem of a lesson, it was a lesson he would never ever forget. Now, further down the road, as an apostle of the risen Lord, he can pronounce peace, for he knows this is the peace that comes not by the sword, but by the cross. And, it seems to me, the rest of his marvellous epistle is devoted to expanding on the blessing that is distilled in his greeting. Why grace and peace, you may be tempted to ask? Well, that's what they would need in their hour of trial and trouble, that's what they would need in the season of severe suffering which for them was just around the corner! This was something they shared in common, this was fellowship at a higher level, they were going through the mill; the reality is, it was going to get an awful lot worse before it got any better. These people were being singed by the same flames of persecution that would ultimately cost Peter his life in just a few

years. Their circumstances were the bleakest imaginable, the long range forecast was ominous, there were no breaks to be seen in the dark panoply of cloud hanging in threatening mode above them; I can tell you, times were exceptionally tough. Yet, what strikes a chord in my heart is this, Peter didn't try to pump them up with a massive dose of positive thinking. As Chuck Swindoll says: 'Instead, he gently reached his hand to their chins and lifted their faces skyward – so they could see beyond their circumstances to their celestial calling.' And the way he did it first of all is best seen in how he introduced himself. All he says is: 'Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ.' When you look at verse 1, the contrast is fairly obvious; he says so much about them and he says so little about himself. He is simply, 'an apostle of Jesus Christ.' He makes no claim to be a prince among the apostles, nor does he feel any need to justify or defend his apostolic office, as Paul had to do on many occasions. The bottom line is, Peter's calling to this role would be extremely well known wherever the gospel had been preached. His was a household name! Everyone knew Peter, for one reason or another! We know from the record in John 1 that Peter was not his original name, the name he had from birth was Simon, but Jesus changed it to Peter which means 'a stone'. The Aramaic equivalent of Peter is Cephas, so Peter was a man with three names; that's enough to give any man an identity crisis! Nearly fifty times in the New Testament he is called Simon; and often he is called Simon Peter. I don't know, perhaps the two names suggest a Christian's two natures: an old nature, Simon, that is prone to fail and make a mess of things; and a new nature, Peter, that can give victory. You see, as Simon, he was only another human piece of clay; but Jesus Christ made a rock out of him! Or we can change the analogy and say, the big fisherman was a big fish in the gospel net!

Peter and Paul are two of a kind, they were both leading lights in the early church. In fact, Peter is also seen as a pillar in the community of God's people. Paul had a special assignment in relation to the

Gentiles, whilst Peter's primary role was to the sons and daughters of father Abraham. In Luke 22:32 the Lord commanded Peter to strengthen his brethren, and in John 21:15-17 he was allocated the responsibility of tending to the flock of God. It seems to me, this epistle has a vital part to play in the outworking of that special ministry. Here is a letter that grew out of a life lived to the glory of God. A number of key events in Peter's life are woven into the fabric of this epistle. Having said that, when we think of Peter as the penman of this letter, we may at first be disappointed. Why did Peter not report to us more of the words and insights of Jesus, why did he not fill us in a little more on some of his miracles? What scenes from the life of Jesus Peter could have painted! There is so much that he could have said that would have made our hearts miss a beat or two! Every Bible student notices how similar Peter's first letter is to the letters of Paul. In so many ways, they are operating on the same wavelength. But, as Edmund Clowney rightly points out, Paul was never with Jesus in the synagogue of Capernaum, Paul was never in a fishing boat with Jesus on the storm tossed lake of Galilee, Paul was never with Jesus in the upper room at Jerusalem. The nagging question is: how can Peter fail to draw on his days with Jesus as he writes to people who have never seen the Lord? The only reasonable explanation is that Peter wasn't in it for what he could get out of it, there was no way that he was going to drop names, and there was no way that he was going to take advantage of his privileged position in the inner circle with Jesus. Peter's aim in putting pen to paper is not to write a diary on the words and works of Jesus, it is not to write a fast moving account of all that the Lord accomplished in his brief ministry on planet earth, I can tell you, it would take more than a short letter to do that, it would take volumes. He would need to cut down a rain forest in the process, such is the abundance of material, it's enough to fill a library! Peter's goal is to encourage the believers so that when trauma and suffering intrudes into their lives, they can face such an unthinkable ordeal with strong hope in the Lord Jesus Christ. One commentator

says, 'Peter wrote to encourage them to be good witnesses to their persecutors.' I don't know how you feel about that, it is so easy to read it in the luxury and comfort of our home, it is even easier to preach it from a pulpit, but it is extremely difficult to do it! In other words, it is easier said than done! If you have ever been mistreated, you know what a great temptation it is to retaliate, to defend yourself, to fight back, to treat the other person as he or she has treated you. Peter does his very best to encourage his fellow believers to put pain in perspective and find hope beyond their suffering. It's maybe something most of us know very little about, I have never faced the kind of persecution which the Christians in the early church experienced; but I have had my own fair share of trials and one upset and another, there have been some big disappointments, and yes, there has been a measure of pain and grief as well. I believe that is what makes 1 Peter so eminently readable, it is just so beautiful; fortunately, in these five chapters we can find comfort and consolation and cheer for our brand of suffering. I suppose that is one of the reasons why I find myself drawn to this particular epistle at this point in time. Sure, it is fascinating to read an authentic document written by someone who knew Jesus so well; but there's more to it than meets the eye! There is a more fundamental reason why I am drawn to it like a magnet to iron filings. Peter is unquestionably an inspired man and what he writes is the precious word of God. The writer of the letter is well worth listening to because, one, the changed life points to his credibility; two, his conviction concerning Jesus being Christ exudes authenticity; and, three, his apostolic office brings a touch or authority to all he had to say. How true it is, people living in rough times need such a messenger! As one Bible teacher has indicated: 'We come to a letter that is addressed to the Christians of Asia by Peter, but to the church of all ages by the Spirit of Christ.' Did you notice how Peter spoke of these dear people? In verse 1 he calls them 'strangers in the world', and in the next breath he says they are 'scattered' all over the place. These two words which Peter

employs turn the world upside down for those inhabitants of Asia Minor, and for us! They are strangers, they are scattered; that means they are aliens who are transients, they are temporary residents, they are travellers headed for their native land. Surely these phrases give us the key to Peter's entire epistle. Peter is writing a kind of travellers' guide for Christian pilgrims who are bound for the heavenly land. He reminds them that their hope is anchored in their homeland. They are called to endure alienation as relative strangers, but they have a heavenly citizenship and destiny. The word translated 'scattered' is the Greek word 'diaspora' and that was a technical term for the Jews who lived outside of Palestine. It is used this way in John 7:35 and James 1:1. It was a fairly common term for those Jews who had been dispersed to the four corners of the earth after the exile of 587 BC. But, in this portion of Scripture, Peter includes his Gentile readers in the Diaspora. Now, what were they to make of that? I can imagine many of them were not impressed, in fact, they were probably offended by such a title. The bottom line is, they should see it as a title of honour. They are the Diaspora, because they are the people of God, scattered in the world. Jesus had looked with tearful compassion on 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel' because they were like 'sheep without a shepherd.' He had come to gather 'his little flock' including other sheep that were not of the sheepfold of Israel. Peter writes in the joyful assurance that the Gentiles in Asia Minor are an integral part of the Lord's flock. The fact that these Gentiles are included in God's Diaspora accounts for the other term that Peter uses. Since they are citizens of heaven, and have another country to which they are going, they are 'strangers', they are transients in the world in which they live. Someone has said: 'In relation to their homeland, they are the Diaspora; in relation to their place of residence, they are aliens. They carry another passport; they are on pilgrimage to the city of God.' These believers were like round pegs in square holes; they were Christians belonging to God in a godless world, they were strangers with heaven stamped on the

front of their travel documents. They are rather like refugees today who are forced to live in countries other than their own. What an unsettling situation that must be! These people, through no fault of their own, were at odds with the surrounding society. At first, the believers were regarded as misfits in society, they were seen as oddities who would eventually go away. But as time went on and they refused to go away, benign neglect turned to virulent opposition and the believers, at best, were ostracised and, at worst, liquidated. It is into this context that Peter says what he does; sure, they are strangers, and yes, they are scattered here and there like windblown chaff. At the same time, seed was also scattered with very positive, fruitful results; and there was no doubt that Christians soon learned that God's way may not be the easiest way, but it is always the best way. They simply needed to look at their situation from a different vantage point, they needed to see it as being a strategic planting by the hand of God. The bottom line is, nothing happens by chance, life for a Christian is not a lottery, it's not a matter of drawing the short straw. He knows what he's doing, He knows where he's going.