

I want to begin my sermon this morning with an illustration from Tim Keller's book, *Making Sense of God*.

Suppose two people of the same age, the same level of education, even the same temperament, are hired to do the exact same job. They are given a task as a part of an assembly line; their job is to put Part A into Slot B as many times as they can in an 8 hour day. Imagine that they are put in the same room, and experience the same lighting, temperature, and ventilation. Their work is equally boring, their conditions are the same in every way—except for one difference. The first person is told that they will be paid an annual salary of \$30,000; the second person is told that their salary will be set at \$30 million.

After a few weeks of work, the first person will likely look for an exit strategy; the work is dull and unfulfilling—they can find something more interesting for the same amount of money. The second person will likely have a different perspective. They might go so far as to say, "*I'm really thankful for my job, in fact, I whistle while I work.*"

Keller notes, "You have two human beings who are experiencing identical circumstances in radically different ways. What makes the difference? It is their expectation of the future. This illustration is not intended to say that all we need is a good income. It does, however, show that what we believe about our future completely controls how we are experiencing our present."¹

Arguably, our lives are more comfortable and people are living longer, than at any other time in history. Despite the fact that we have access to education and healthcare, we have relative safety, freedom, and food, that is unparalleled in the history of the world, the rate of anxiety, depression, and suicide continues to rise in Secular Western cultures.

There seems to be a collective despair that has descended, and with it, a growing lack of resilience to face difficulty. *Why is this happening?*

In his book, *History of the Idea of Progress*, Robert Nisbet offers an explanation. Generally speaking, in the Ancient World, people thought about time—and history itself—as cyclical—things endlessly repeating. Christian thinking offered an alternative: time, and history itself, is linear, things are moving forward, under God's sovereign care, to their appointed end. The day will come when God will ensure that wrongs are made right, that weapons are laid down, and peace is established on the earth. It's the idea of progress, grounded in the providential nature and activity of God.

Over time, however, the idea of progress was secularized, which is to say, the core idea remained but God was removed from equation. "*We don't need God to guide history or progress. We have all the intelligence, creativity, and courage that we need. If we set our minds to it, we can make the world better—without God.*"²

¹ Tim Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical*, 153.

² Keller, 154-155.

But there's nothing like the prolonged experience of pain to expose the myth of unending progress; the last 100 years, in large part, has burst the bubble. The early part of the 20th Century was marked by the Great War, followed by the Great Depression, which in turn was followed by another Great War. Hitler's rise to power, and his extermination attempts, led to the death of more than 6 million Jews.

Stalin's regime was equally systematic, and much worse: more than 20 million people were put to death. Chairman Mao Zedong of China was even more successful: 45 million died under his regime. The Korean War, the Viet Nam War, not to mention the genocides in Cambodia and Rwanda. The 20th century has been described as the bloodiest in human history. In light of these realities, a confidence in the uninterrupted progress of humanity was shown to be naïve.

Many of our High School students and Young Adults today are confident that they will be much worse off than their parents were. University graduates struggle to find good jobs. Purchasing real estate in urban settings seems beyond reach. There's the threat of global markets collapsing, or the spread of global pandemics. Cyber attacks. Terrorist attacks. Climate change disaster. These are not doomsday prophecies, they are probabilities in our day and time.

Even if we manage to banish these unpleasant thoughts, many people begin to despair when it seems as though their life is a jumble of one disconnected event after another. When we live for the moment, seeking one experience, achievement, or relationship after another, satisfaction eventually fades, and we experience a crisis of meaning. *What is all of this for? Where is all of this going?*

We cannot live well without hope. This Sunday marks the last sermon in our *Reasons To Believe* series, but this series will resurface in the future; there's so many subjects to be explored.

As you might have guessed, the subject of today's sermon is "**hope.**" Can we live well without hope? Can a secular worldview provide any foundation for hope? And what is the Christian understanding of hope?

If you have a Bible with you this morning, let me invite you to turn with me to 1 Peter 1:3-9. One of Jesus' original 12 disciples, Peter wrote a letter to Christians who had been scattered throughout the Roman Empire.

"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 honour 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."

As we read this Scripture, one thing immediately becomes clear: **A focus on the future, grounds Christians in the present.**

Peter begins in vs. 3 by blessing God for what he calls, “new birth.” Elsewhere this reality is described as “regeneration,” or “conversion;” it is the act by which God makes us new. This “new birth” changes one's status before God—we are adopted into His family—but it also changes the way we live before others (we believe new things, pursue new things, say and do new things).

The operative word in vs. 3 is “*mercy*.” Mercy is first and foremost an undeserved kindness from God. Through Jesus, God reaches out to humanity in our sinful opposition to him, offering forgiveness; apart from this mercy, there is no possibility of new birth.

“*In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead*”. Pastorally, Peter was writing to a group of people who were suffering for the faith, at the hands of Rome. There wasn't any reason to believe that things were going to get better any time soon. No one lives well in the absence of hope.

But hope, as we all know, is connected to a future reality; no one hopes for what they already have.³ The “living hope” that Peter speaks about is connected to Jesus Christ, the One who died, was raised to life, and now lives forever.

³ C.f. Romans 8:22-25.

⁴ Peter H. Davids, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle of Peter*, 52.

⁵ Davids, 52.

Peter Davids writes, “because Jesus really did shatter the gates of death and exists now as our living Lord, those who have committed themselves to him share in his new life and can expect to participate fully in it in the future. . . . It is this reality which will enable the readers to face even death without fear, for death is not the end of the Christian, but a beginning.”⁴

Vs. 4, this “new birth” (a new relationship with God), leads to a “living hope” (connected to Jesus, the One who conquered death), guaranteeing a promised “inheritance”. And this inheritance is further described by three adjectives:

- Our inheritance cannot *perish* or die; it is permanent.
- Our inheritance cannot *spoil* or rot like an overripe piece of fruit.
- Our inheritance cannot *fade* or wither like a flower.

Almost everything we have, can be taken from us. Relationships, status, possessions, and dignity—they can perish, spoil, or fade. But God promises a reward that “no force on Earth can touch.”⁵

Not only does God preserve our inheritance, vs. 5, He preserves us. The image given is a military one; God shields us. He is our fortress, our strength, our armour bearer. God does not shield us from all trouble—we are not made immune to pain—but He is with us, and He does strengthen us so that we are able to stand. Nothing can

wrench us from His grasp, and no one can take what He has given to us.

Peter speaks of a coming salvation and to modern ears, this notion is offensive. To speak of salvation implies that humanity needs to be saved from something. Either there is a standard of behaviour that we cannot meet, or an enemy too strong to conquer on our own. From the Bible's perspective, both issues are in play. But rather than focus on the offence of the Gospel, Peter directs people to the certainty of salvation—God will do what He has promised.

Vs. 6 goes on to paint a picture that describes our experience of reality. While we may experience new birth and a living hope, we also experience suffering; it's a consequence of living in a broken world. Suffering is not a part of God's plan, but that doesn't mean that it has free reign; God can redeem suffering for His purposes. **And so, hope can lead to joy, no matter our circumstances**

Vs. 7: This is a sweeping generalization I know, but in the West we prize comfort above almost everything. *We don't want life to be hard, we want it to be easy. Trials, difficulty, suffering, might produce character in us, it might test and refine our faith, but we'd rather avoid pain at all costs.*

Standing with, and for, God will cost us something, the question becomes, *is the price worth paying?* In vs. 7 Peter compares faith to

gold that is refined by fire—trial and difficulty test our faith, revealing it for what it is, and, purifying it so that it becomes even more valuable. When we stand with, and for, God, it results in praise, glory and honour. *My dear people, it's worth it; He's worth it!* We love Him because He first loved us. We've been forgiven, adopted into His family, and given an inheritance cannot perish, spoil, or fade.

What we believe about the future shapes our experience of the present. It's for this reason that Christians are people of hope.

Thinking about Death: One of the great challenges to a secular worldview is that it fails to deal meaningfully with one of the most central aspects of our human experience, namely, death.⁶

Tim Keller writes, "Rather than to see death as a terror...many contemporary thinkers counter that [death] is nothing to fear and that it can indeed be seen as part of the living story of the world... Perhaps the most famous pop-culture expression of this account is put forth in the movie *The Lion King*, in which a young lion is told that, though lions eat the antelope, they eventually die and fertilize the grass, and the antelopes eat the grass, 'and so we are all connected in the great Circle of Life'...But the reality is that the great majority of people fear death".⁷

Keller continues, "All ancient myths and legends that deal with death

⁶ Keller, 159.

⁷ Keller, 160, 161.

depicted it as an intrusion, an aberration, and a monstrosity... You will not find the accumulated wisdom of the ages insisting that death is perfectly natural. Death is not the way it is supposed to be. Death does not *feel* natural, however biologically necessary it may be.”⁸

The shortest verse in the entire Bible can be found in John 11:35, and it consists of only two words: “*Jesus wept.*” Why did Jesus weep? He was standing beside the tomb of a close friend. The last time Jesus saw his friend, Lazarus was healthy, vibrant, full of life—how quickly things can change.

As He stood beside the tomb, and saw the friends and family of Lazarus overcome with grief, we’re told that Jesus was “*deeply moved in spirit and troubled*”. A more literal translation might read, “*Jesus was overcome with sorrow and anger.*” Sorrow we understand, but why anger? He wasn’t angry at Lazarus for dying, or at those who looked after Lazarus for not doing a better job—Jesus was angry at death itself. Death was never a part of God’s plan for this world.

Death interrupts, it separates us from the ones we love. Death isn’t “perfectly natural,” it’s an intrusion, an aberration, and a monstrosity.

In this same encounter, in John 11, Jesus had a conversation with Martha, the sister of Lazarus. In essence, Jesus asked her about the future, about Lazarus’ future, and Martha’s answer revealed her theology—in the end, *God will raise Lazarus from the grave.*

Jesus’ responded immediately, “*Martha, you don't have to wait for the End. I am, right now, Resurrection and Life. The one who believes in me, even though he or she dies, will live.*” A new birth, a living hope, an inheritance that will never perish, spoil, or fade. Jesus held out this hope to Martha and she took Him at His word.

illus: We don’t realize how important hope is, until we meet someone without it. Four weeks ago, here at NSA, I officiated the memorial service of a High School student; his name was Eli, and he was connected to our church. At the age of 11, Eli made a profession of faith in Christ and was baptized, right here.

The memorial service was packed, 500+, with easily half of the attendees being High School students. In the days that followed a number of students had questions about Eli’s faith and so Eli’s mom invited a group of them to drop by her house, and she asked me to come over and answer whatever questions they might have.

On a Thursday afternoon, 25-30 students crowded into her living room and for 90 minutes straight, we talked about life, death, faith, and grief. *Did God plan for Eli to die? Where is he now? Is he lonely? Is he sad because we are all hurting?* The questions kept coming, and bit by bit, I told them the story of God becoming human—in Jesus—because of His great love for the world.

I shared what the Bible says about life after death. *The wait for Eli is over. He is, right now, face to face with God, enveloped by glory. One day it will be our turn, but for now, we live—with faith—entrusting ourselves to Jesus.*

⁸ Keller, 162.

At one point, a young man raised his hand. *“I don’t mean any disrespect,”* he said, *“but I’m not a person of faith, I’m an atheist, and I’m sad all of the time. But I have a question I want to ask you about God.”* I interrupted him right then and there.

“Hold on a moment...you just said that you’re an atheist, and that you’re sad all of the time; please tell me, in your mind, what’s the connection between the two?” He thought for a moment and then responded. *“I guess, as an atheist, I’m a glass-half-empty kind of guy. But hearing you talk about faith, I think to myself, ‘Maybe if I had faith, I’d know the kind of hope you are talking about.’”*

I was momentarily stunned; what this young man had said was profound. I looked around the circle at all of these precious faces, and my heart was crying out, *“Did you hear what he just said?!”* **We do not live well without hope. We’re not meant to.**

Conclusion: I conclude this morning with a blog post written by John Stackhouse. John is a former professor of mine, a brilliant writer, and someone with a deep love for the church and for pastors. I’m so grateful for the ways he has helped to sharpen my thinking.

A few years ago, John was on vacation when he got the news that the daughter of one of his colleagues had been killed in a car accident, travelling an inch road between Trail and Castlegar. John was asked to preach at her funeral, and he did. This is what John writes about the experience:

“I wasn’t ready for such an awful occasion. Who is?

My late father was a cancer surgeon. He would operate in the mornings and then meet patients in the afternoons. And almost every day...he’d have to give someone the grim news that there was nothing they could do, the disease was too far advanced, and they would face death very soon.

What percentage of his patients were ready for such news? Zero. Who is? Evelyn Bodner was on her way to write a mid-term exam. She wasn’t ready for death. Who is? But she *was* ready for what comes after. What [comes after]? And how do you prepare for that?

Many Canadians, even those who have attended church, imagine the next life as our souls flying up to heaven, being handed a white robe, being assigned a particular cloud, and being issued a harp to play... forever. How do you prepare for that “Far Side” cartoon-version of heaven: an endless, dull worship service? Presumably by finding the most boring church in town and attending its meetings as often as you can.

But Evelyn knew better...She had worshiped in churches that taught the Bible well. And she knew that the last two chapters of the Bible depict...not us going up to heaven...but God bringing heaven down to earth. The New Jerusalem is not some vague, vaporous thing, but an actual city, replete with trees and water and fruit and light and buildings and streets and joy. It isn’t an escape from earth. It is Earth 2.0.

How do you prepare for that? By becoming perfect, so you won’t spoil it. And by becoming immortal, so you can enjoy it forever.

Evelyn did her best. She plunged into life...She was a...talented musician, an athlete and lifeguard, with homemaking skills and a hospitable heart who gave happiness to everyone who knew her. She lived every day to become more and more the best version of herself, practicing living the fullest, richest life she could.

And she knew that wouldn't be enough. She couldn't make herself perfect, nor immortal. So Evelyn trusted God for all she couldn't do herself. She trusted Jesus' Cross to atone for her sins, and Jesus' Resurrection for her hope that she, too, would be raised from the dead.

She trusted the Holy Spirit to give her a fresh start in a new life, to be born again. She trusted the Spirit to direct and empower her each day to become more and more the person God wanted her to be. She trusted the Bible, among the many books she loved, to give her the very Word of God as guide and encouragement in every decision. And she trusted the Church for sustaining company on the Way.

She turned to God for what she couldn't provide for herself: rescue, renewal, and rehabilitation...

On that terrible day, anyone who knew her could be sure that Evelyn Bodner was ready for that midterm. But she never got there. She went straight to the final...the final final. And when she arrived, there was no exam. Just a warm, warm welcome...to the rest of her life. For that, Evelyn Bodner was ready.”⁹

A new birth, into a living hope, and an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade—this is what waits for those who turn to God through Jesus Christ. Do you have this hope? Are you ready?

Prayer

Worship

Benediction

⁹ John Stackhouse, <http://www.johnstackhouse.com/2018/03/14/who-is-ready/>