

What is the Reason for your Hope?

Fellow children of God,

“Be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” What reasons do you have for hope? It’s been said that hope is built on the certainty of the past and an anticipation of the future; you need a solid foundation of a good past to work off of, and you need a bright future to look forward to.

I think that many people are desperate for hope right now, with things being so uncertain. Maybe you heard of the poem “The Great Realization” by the British poet Tomos Roberts. You can watch it on Youtube. It is a children’s story told by a father to his young children, several years in the future; the story he tells looks back on our current pandemic. The idea is that, through the current lockdown and restrictions, people learn to appreciate family and friends, and change their lives to focus on those priorities—this is the “realization” he refers to. I read an interview where the poet was asked, Why made you think there would be such a good change in society from this time? And he basically said, No bad time lasts forever; whenever there is a bad period, it is followed by something better. Now, I guess that is true; and we can certainly pray that people will learn to love their families more. But it’s a pretty uncertain basis for hope, to simply say bad times are followed by good times.

The Apostle Peter says that we Christians have absolute certainty about our future, because of the truth of the past. Today let’s ask, What is the Reason for Your Hope?

Peter makes the past clear in verse 18. **“For Christ suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.”** Jesus suffered death once to save us. Old Testament believers had to offer sacrifices again and again, never really paying for all the sins they committed against God. But Jesus gave the perfect sacrifice, himself, on the cross. That sacrifice was for all people, paying for every sin ever committed.

He was **“the righteous for the unrighteous.”** The perfect Son of God took the place of sinners. Only he could pay the price. He did this **“to bring you to God.”** You are reconciled to the holy Lord! Are you going to heaven? There is no reason to doubt it. You are saved by Jesus’ holy, precious blood.

And Jesus provided further proof. **“He was put to death in the body but made alive in the spirit.”** Jesus truly died, but then he came alive. He was seen again and again, proving there is life after death.

But where was the first place he went after rising? **“He went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits—to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built.”** The first thing Jesus did after rising was speak to some imprisoned spirits.

What prison was this? Well, the people had lived in the days of Noah—that was thousands of years before Jesus died on the cross. And they were “spirits.” Clearly, these are people who had died; and since they are remembered for their disobedience, their souls had gone to hell when they died. That is the prison.

So Jesus visited this prison of hell; but it was not to bring any good news. The Bible is clear; when we die, our souls leave our bodies and either go to heaven if we believe in him, or else they go to hell if they reject him. On Judgment Day, those who reject Jesus will have their souls reunited with their bodies and they will physically endure the torment of hell. But already now they are suffering; and they know that Jesus won the victory.

That is what Jesus proclaimed to the spirits—that he had defeated Satan. Since they refused to believe in him, they were lost too. That is a torment to those who rejected Christ.

But what a comfort this is for us. Sometimes it may seem like Satan is winning; or we may only think about the suffering we are going through. But our Champion has won the victory. Jesus' descent into hell is like a victorious general riding in a car though the defeated enemy's capital. He would only do that if his victory was complete. Jesus completely defeated Satan.

That means we will not be punished. Instead, we have eternal life. When we die, our souls will go to be with God. And at the Judgment, our bodies will be cleansed of all pain and weaknesses, and we will live physical lives once again in our new home, on that new earth prepared for us.

You see the absolutely solid foundation for your hope? Jesus died for you; he rose; he descended to hell to proclaim his victory; and, Peter says, he **“has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.”** And he will return to take us to live with him and his holy angels forevermore. The past is certain; your future is certain, too. What a reason for hope.

But Peter says there is more. He talked about Jesus proclaiming his victory to the dead unbelievers in hell, pointing especially to those from Noah's day; and then Peter talks about the further comfort foreshadowed by Noah.

The evil on earth was so great, God was going to wipe out all life on earth. But he saved Noah and his family, and the animals he brought onto the ark with him. We usually think of the water that came from above and below as destructive—it wiped out the living things on earth. But Peter points out that the water saved Noah and his family. It lifted them up above the earth so they weren't destroyed.

And then he makes this great application: **“This water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also.”** Water saved Noah physically; the water of baptism saves you spiritually.

Some people think that baptism doesn't actually do anything for you; but God says right here, **“Baptism saves you.”** Churches that deny the power of baptism miss what Peter says in verse 21: **“It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”** You see, baptism unites you to Jesus in his resurrection. That is the power at work in baptism! The Apostle Paul wrote that in baptism, our sinful selves are put to death and buried in Jesus' tomb; and just as Jesus rose from the dead, so we also rise to live a new life! The power of baptism is the power of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Peter says further that baptism is no mere physical washing, but it is **“the pledge of a clear conscience toward God.”** When you were baptized, God was taking a pledge; he was making a promise; he was guaranteeing your salvation. You have a clear conscience—a conscience that cannot accuse you or condemn you, because all of your sin have been washed away. What a reason for hope you have!

They say that children can't keep a secret. Children of God can't keep the hope we have a secret, either. That's why Peter says, **"In your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you for the reason for the hope you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."** You are always prepared, because you know what Christ has done for you.

And you can live a life of "gentleness and respect." You know, it used to be looked up to, even considered "manly," to be gentle and respectful of others. But it probably seems pretty counter-cultural today. People think they need to attack others, be loud and obnoxious in pressing their views. Why do people act that way? It's because they feel threatened. If you think you're under attack, you may feel you should attack back, even attack others randomly.

Many people are feeling threatened now, with all the uncertainty of the covid illness. Add that to the political partisanship of our country, and lots of people think they need to attack.

But we Christians can be confident and secure, even if we are under attack. Listen to how Peter began this section: **"Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened."** We are the children of God! We have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb! We have the name of God placed on us in baptism. We have a beautiful home, with riches that cannot fade or perish, stored up for us in heaven!

So we can be gentle and respectful, even toward those who may attack us. We don't need to be sarcastic when talking about others. We don't need to share that insulting Facebook post. Instead, we can let the light of the Gospel shine in all that we say and do.

We can do as Peter says, and be prepared to tell others the reason for the hope we have, and do it with gentleness and respect. As he continues, **"keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander."** People will see our good behavior, that we don't lash out at others, and some of them will be embarrassed by their anger. And they'll want to find out why. How can we have such confidence?

And then we can tell them. Jesus died for us; he rose; he even descended to hell to proclaim his victory; he ascended to heaven, and he will come to get us so we can live with him forever.

That is the reason for the hope you have. You are prepared to tell everyone who asks. Amen.