West Van Baptist, September 13

The Best News Ever

1 Peter 1:3-12

I. Picturing God's plan

The land of Ketisis was ruled by a very powerful, good, wise King. His people enjoyed good laws, a healthy economy, and amazing quality of life. Unfortunately, the citizens of this land were … well, rather stupid. So in spite of the good things they enjoyed, they complained about their lives and their Lord.

"OK," said the wise King. "Let's let them pick a leader and see what happens." They set up an election, and the very foolish people of Ketisis elected a Governor who was evil. Soon they had unjust laws, a broken economy, and a terrible quality of life.

The king could have ignored what was happening in this province. But he had compassion on the people, and launched a plan to make things right again. He chose not to send in the army right away (which would just make them more unhappy). Instead, he sent his son with a smaller force to recapture the capital city and key resources. In that territory, they re-established law and order, and brought peace and prosperity again.

This divided situation was just a temporary step, but it was important. It allowed the people of Ketisis to see the difference between the life they had chosen and what the King offered. Not everyone understood or acknowledged this difference, but some paid attention and were drawn to the territory under the King's rule. That prepared the way for a more dramatic military action to re-take the whole of Ketisis. When the time was right, the King re-asserted His authority over the whole land, and once again they had good laws, a healthy economy, and an amazing quality of life. And anyone with sense could see that this was how it should be!

Let's diagram this process. [See powerpoint.] The black box represents an unhealthy kingdom under the control of an evil Governor. The arrow follows the King's plan, which ends in a gold box that represents a renewed kingdom filled with peace and prosperity under a wise and good Lord.

The space between these boxes shows a mixed situation. The evil Governor is still strong. The systems he has set up dominate the people in his territory, and they impact everyone in Ketisis. However, things change with the arrival of the King's son. The old regime is no longer in complete control. Those who come to the son's territory are freed from the worst of the Governor's influence, and they get a taste for the good life the King offers. The golden days haven't arrived yet, but they're coming, and already things are much better for those who follow the King's son.

My story about Ketisis is completely make-believe. The diagram isn't. It might feel familiar, because it's a simple picture of what the New Testament teaches about God's plan of salvation in history.

The Bible tells us that sin has created an evil system in our world, ruled behind the scenes by evil spiritual forces. God, the true King, plans to overturn that system, replacing it with a "kingdom" where all is good, where His people enjoy life that is both abundant and everlasting.

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But the transformation from the old age to the new, from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light does not happen all in one instant. At present we live in a time of transition and a mixed situation. Satan is still alive and well, and much of our world operates as an evil system, enslaving many people and impacting all of us, even those who have placed their trust in Jesus.

However, the coming, death, and resurrection of Jesus has brought a decisive change. The Kingdom of God is now planted and growing in this broken world. It offers a place of refuge and hope for those who will enter it. And it lets everyone who is paying attention see the difference between the old ways and God's new and living way.

The time is coming when God the King will put a final end to everything that is evil, renewing creation, overturning death with resurrection, bringing a full and eternal life for all who embrace HIs rule. We look forward to that day. In the meantime, followers of Jesus are in an "in-between" situation, in history and in our own lives (so the diagram applies to us individually, too). We've died to sin and received new life when we embraced Jesus. Yet echoes of our old nature still influence us, and we need to "put to death" that old way of life and let God's Spirit fill us every day. We believe the dead will be raised to a new life that has no end. Yet for now we still live in these mortal, aging, dying bodies. Jesus *has* saved us. Yet we await the day when we *will* experience salvation in full.

This diagram isn't the only way to picture God's plan of salvation. But it's a helpful one. And it's important that we understand the message clearly, because there are also a lot of false pictures floating around: pictures that describe suggest God's goal is for us to leave the physical world and live on clouds, or those frequent images of meeting St. Peter at the gate of heaven and trying to convince him to let us in.

Instead of drawing imaginary pictures of Peter, we need to listen to Peter's own words about Christian faith. This fall we're doing that in a sermon series on Peter's first letter. Last week we looked at the introduction, and learned that this letter is designed to help us experience God's grace and peace in a worried world. Today we turn to the first main section, which is a prayer of praise for all God has done. In this prayer, Peter describes the gospel—the good news about God's plan to set us free.

We'll see that Peter's description looks a lot like our simple diagram. More important, we'll find that the news he shares is a source of joy and encouragement and a reason to worship. Because the gospel—the good news about Jesus—really is the best news ever!

II. <u>Peter describes the gospel—the "good news"</u>

Peter begins: *<u>Praise</u> be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!*

Why? What motivates Peter's praise? He celebrates God's plan to deliver us from the old way of life and bring us into a glorious new creation. *In His great mercy He has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, 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* (1:3-5).

This plan is rooted entirely in God's grace—His unearned kindness. "*In His great <u>mercy</u> He has given us a new birth….*" We don't earn God's help. We can't free ourselves from sin or make ourselves

worthy of Him. Fortunately, we don't have to. Like the very good King of Ketisis, but so much more, God is willing to help us because of the love in His own heart.

What does His mercy offer? *He has given us a <u>new birth</u>*. I've already said that the diagram with its 2 boxes applies to our individual lives as well as to history. The Bible insists that we are all born with a natural tendency toward sin, with all its selfishness, pride, deceit, and disobedience. We need to be forgiven, and that old way of life needs to be left behind. In fact, the New Testament says it needs to *die*, and to be replaced with a new life that loves and worships and obeys our Creator. So Jesus tells us that we *must be born again* (John 3:7), given a new life by God's Holy Spirit. This is the essence of being a Christian, and it's symbolized in baptism, where going under the water and coming back up pictures our willingness to die to that old self and begin again with a new life.

When we acknowledge our sin to God, ask His forgiveness, and commit ourselves to follow His Son Jesus, a transformation happens in us. There is a *new birth*, purchased by Jesus' death and made possible by His resurrection from the dead. Because He defeated death, we can have new spiritual life right now, bringing a new awareness of God's presence, a change in our inner attitudes and desires, a heart for worship, and a love for God and others that wasn't there before.

Peter doesn't stop here. He says we have a *new birth into a living <u>hope</u> … and into an <u>inheritance</u> that can never perish, spoil or fade*. We're not in the golden age yet. We live in the "in-between." Jesus has brought the Kingdom of God to earth; yet sin is still strong in this world and we're waiting for a new creation where there is no more sin and death. At a personal level we have a new spiritual life, yet we still struggle with the shadows of our old nature, and we still live in fragile, aging, dying bodies. We have tasted God's new life, but we still wait and "hope" to experience it fully.

Here I need to comment on the word "hope." Usually in modern English, if I say I "hope" for something I mean I'd like it to happen but I'm not confident about it. "I hope I'll get a raise." "I hope the Canucks will make the playoffs this year." But when the Bible talks about our "hope," it means we are confident that what we are waiting for will really happen, because God is strong and He keeps His promises. Peter hopes we will experience resurrection and eternal life because he has seen with his own eyes that Jesus is risen from the dead, and Jesus has promised life to us. God's promises to His children are supported by all the power of Heaven, so our inheritance *can never perish, spoil, or fade*. When the right time comes, He *will* make the world new, and we *will* be fully transformed.

Until then, *through faith [we] are <u>shielded by God's power</u>*. Even in this "in-between" time, and even though we are weak, God is more than strong enough to keep us safe.

That's how Peter describes the gospel in this prayer. "Gospel" is the right word for it, because it really is good news!

III. <u>Peter describes faith</u>

Our new birth flows out of God's mercy. But that word "faith" reminds us that you and I do have a part to play. Peter says we're shielded by God's power *through <u>faith</u>*. Here as in the rest of the New Testament, we learn that we receive God's gifts through faith.

What exactly is faith? Peter is writing to Christians, so he doesn't explain it all here. But it's not complicated. In the gospels we learn how Peter and the other disciples came to follow Jesus. Jesus approached them with a claim and an invitation: "I am the one sent from God that you have been waiting for. Trust me, come follow me, let me make you into someone new." They listened, believed, and followed.

Faith isn't a game of make-believe, closing our eyes and pretending something is true. Jesus backed up His claims with actions; then asked the disciples to trust Him. Later Peter (and John and Paul and others) took the same approach in their preaching. They made a claim: "Jesus is God's Anointed One—we have seen Him risen from the dead!" Then they gave the invitation: "Put your trust in Jesus, as we have. Follow Him and let Him make you someone new."

For us as for Peter, "faith" means hearing the message of Jesus, trusting that it's true, and acting accordingly. That faith results in new birth and brings us under the protecting power of God.

It also creates joy. Faith responds to good news, and it brings an experience of new life. Of course it brings joy (and peace, and other good things)! *In all this you greatly rejoice*.

A Christian's joy is firmly anchored and strong, even when we face challenges. Peter adds: *In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials* (1:6). Peter remembers that we live in an "in-between" time, born again but still waiting for the fulfillment of God's plan when Jesus returns. Faith doesn't take us out of the in-between time. Faith is the essential quality we need while we are waiting for God's promises to be fulfilled.

Faith is precious. So really, we shouldn't be surprised if our faith is sometimes tested. We test valuable things all the time. A friend of mine inherited several boxes full of personal belongings from a family member who passed away. In one of those boxes was a "Rolex" watch. "Well," thought my friend, "this is great! I didn't expect much from Uncle Charlie, but this might be worth enough to buy me a new car." So he took it to the Jeweler to confirm that it was real. Unfortunately it wasn't. It was worth enough to buy him lunch at McDonalds.

For centuries people have tested the purity of gold nuggets by putting them in the fire. Peter observes: *These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world* (1:7, NLT).

No one likes to have their faith tested by difficulties. Yet the process can make our faith stronger as we see God help us again and again. And it proves (to us and to everyone) that our faith is real, pure, and precious. It's the real Rolex. It's 24-carat gold! The end result is even more joy, and the precious words "Well done!" from our Lord when we meet Him face to face.

Peter adds one more interesting comment. *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, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls* (1:8-9).

Pain isn't the only thing that can test our faith. Sometimes God gives us lots of evidence on which to base our trust. Sometimes He calls us to trust when we don't see much at all. Peter and the other

disciples didn't see Jesus rise from the dead until several years into their life together, but they did hear His teaching and watch His miracles. Peter's readers didn't have either opportunity. Neither do we. We're dependent on the testimony of Peter and other witnesses, and then on our experience of new birth. This requires a lot of trust, and it can be even harder when we're facing trouble and waiting for God to answer prayers.

I wonder how often Peter's mind went back to the day the resurrected Jesus appeared to Thomas and the other disciples, and to Jesus' words: "*Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed"* (John 20:29). God reserves special blessing for those who trust Him without always seeing everything clearly. Perhaps that's why Peter tells his readers, *you believe in Him and are filled with inexpressible and glorious joy*, and why he reminds us that even now we are tasting the salvation that comes through faith.

IV. Peter reflects on prophecy

Suddenly at verse 10, Peter starts talking about the Old Testament prophets. *Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when He predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow* (1:10-11).

This might seem like a strange change of topic. I think Peter adds these comments for 2 reasons.

First, prophecy is part of our rationale for trusting in Jesus. Centuries before He was born, Men of God wrote messages about a coming Messiah from David's family who would preach good news, demonstrate God's power, suffer to bring forgiveness, and ultimately be exalted as our life-giving King. Jesus fulfilled those expectations in an amazing way. Even though we may not have seen Jesus with our eyes, we can all study those prophecies and find that our faith in Jesus is strengthened.

Second, the prophets remind us that we're actually a very privileged people. *It was revealed to [those prophets] that they were not serving themselves but you, when the spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven* (1:12).

It might be tempting to think, "We're not apostles who saw Jesus first-hand, so really we're not very important, and it's *so* hard for us." But we need a bigger perspective. Generations of godly people like Isaiah, Jeremiah and David served God, walked with Him, believed that one day He would send Messiah, and even received prophecies about Messiah … but they did not get to see those promises fulfilled. They didn't even fully understand what they were prophesying. They just had to trust God where they were, believing that He would keep His promises at the right time.

Isaiah, Jeremiah, David, and others were important figures in God's plan. But God has blessed us—you and me—with things they never received. We have the whole story of Jesus from start to finish. We've heard reports of His resurrection from eye-witnesses like Peter. We've experienced the life-giving presence of the Holy Spirit. We're not apostles, but we have good reasons to trust and follow Jesus, and to be *filled with inexpressible and glorious joy*.

If that's not enough, consider the final statement in the passage: *Even angels long to look into these things* (1:12). Angels get to see and worship God. They experience things you and I will never experience on this side of heaven. Yet there are some things even the angels don't get to fully understand or explore. One of those things is the message of salvation. They know something about it, of course. But they long to know more.

You and I have had that message shared with us in full, and we have the privilege of receiving it, trusting it, and experiencing the life and joy it brings. That's amazing! It really is the best news ever.

V. <u>So what?</u>

As always, it's important for us to ask: "So what? Are there some practical ways we can respond to 1 Peter this morning?" I have a couple suggestions.

(1) Let's keep our story straight

Canada is not a Christian nation. But there is enough Christian influence in our history so that most people have heard the words "salvation" and "gospel" and they've seen pictures of St. Peter, even if they don't go to church. The words are pretty familiar. But there are many misunderstandings about what the Christian message actually is. Sometimes these even sneak into the church. So we meet people who think that if you just say a prayer using the name "Jesus," everything in life will be happy and smooth. Or that heaven involves clouds and harps. Or that when you die you'll meet St. Peter at the gate to heaven and need to convince him to let you in because your good deeds outweigh your bad ones.

We need to know what Peter (and James and John and Paul) actually taught about salvation and the gospel. After all, they're the ones who learned it from Jesus. We need to understand God's plan to overturn a broken world and establish His own Kingdom, and His work to free us from an old way of living and create a new life in us. We need to understand Jesus' role in that plan, and what it means to put our trust in Him for new birth now and the hope of eternal life to come. We need to learn how to live faithfully in the "in-between," as people who are "in the world but not of the world." We need to learn how to have hope and joy even when we're tested.

We learn this by reading 1 Peter, and James, and John, and Matthew, and Paul's letters. So we need to spend time in the Bible, studying it, discussing it, and letting it shape our view of the gospel. Not just on Sunday morning at church. All week long we hear other voices peddling other messages, other versions of the "gospel" that don't have the story straight. Let's let God's Word be the most important voice, the one that shapes our thinking. We need this to keep our own faith healthy, and to share an accurate message with others.

(2) Let's answer when Jesus calls

The gospel is an invitation. It's Jesus saying, "Come and follow me." It's passed to us by Peter and others who say: "I've found Jesus' message to be true. Come and follow Him with me."

Most of us here have said "yes" to that invitation already. Probably there are some who haven't yet. That's fine—everyone is welcome. Still, the best thing I have to offer you is: "I needed to leave an

old life behind and find a new one. Jesus promised to make me a new creation if I'd let Him. I've found Jesus' message to be true. Come and follow Him with me—with us."

There's no pressure in this invitation. Don't do anything because I say so. But if you hear your heart telling you that you need something more in life, listen to it. And if you sense the Spirit of God nudging you to get to know and follow Jesus, listen. You'll be so glad you did.

(3) Let's expect to be joyful

Peter tells us that God's plan for His people is amazing beyond anything we can imagine. It's an inheritance so good that only heaven can hold it. It's a living hope—it brings transformed life now and hope of a perfected, fulfilling, and eternal life because our Lord has conquered death. It's a source of *inexpressible and glorious joy*.

Jesus wants us to live in Joy. Joy so deep that it fills our hearts even in this "in-between" time, when things are sometimes hard and we don't see Him with our eyes and our faith is tested. The gospel is the best news ever. If it doesn't bring you joy, you've either misunderstood it or lost sight of it. So as we study God's good news together, as we read about it and meditate on it and live it day by day, may it bring us a joy that's bright and beautiful and too good to express in words. That's what our powerful, good, wise King wants for us.