

The hope we have

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 24 February 2013

Preacher: John Stevens

[0 : 00] Well, in a couple of months' time, it's going to be the London Marathon. And something approximating to 40,000 people are going to run just over 26 miles.

! Some of them will be elite athletes. Some of them will be regular runners. Some of them will simply be trying to raise money for charity. Now, I have never run a marathon, and I couldn't for a moment imagine what running a marathon would be like.

I couldn't imagine keeping going for those 26 miles, coping with the pain and the onset of exhaustion.

I wonder what it is that keeps those marathon runners going to the end. I guess for many of them, it's simply the hope of finishing the race. The glory of what they might achieve, the picture of themselves receiving the medal at the end of it.

Maybe it's the hope of all the money that they'll raise for their chosen course, chosen course. What keeps them going?

[1 : 06] This week, Mo Farah, who many of you will know, won the 5,000 metres and the 10,000 metres at the London Olympics, announced that he was going to run the London Marathon.

But rather extraordinarily, he said he was only going to run half of it. He was going to start the race. He'll be there right at the front with the elite athletes. But he's actually only going to run 13 miles, and then he's going to stop.

He does hope eventually to move up to the marathon, but he's not going to run it all this time. And Paula Radcliffe, who's the women's marathon world record holder, effectively said, what's the point? Why would you want to win half a marathon?

You see, he doesn't expect to keep going and to finish the race. Well, the challenge for us this morning from this passage is what is going to keep us going in the Christian life?

What is going to enable us to keep running the race so that we finish? Both personally as Christians and also as a church as we seek to fulfil the mission that God has given to us.

[2 : 15] What is going to sustain us and enable us to keep going? And in particular, what is going to sustain us in the face of the suffering that the Christian life involves?

The sacrifice that the Christian life involves? The self-denial that the Christian life involves? What's going to keep us going in the face of the pain and the face of the sufferings that we experience as God's people?

Because that's really what the letter of 1 Peter is all about. Peter is writing to these Christians who we've heard were living in places in Turkey who were facing persecution.

The letter of Peter is written just at the point at which the Roman authorities are beginning to realise what the Christians really believe. That the Christians really believe that Jesus is the Lord, the King that everybody must worship.

And that as a result, the Christians refuse to worship the Roman Emperor as a God. Finally, the Roman authorities have begun to realise what the Christians are really all about.

[3 : 28] And the result is the temperature is rising and there is the beginnings of persecution. As we read the book of Acts, the persecution of the Christians in the early days came almost exclusively from the Jews.

But now, the Romans are beginning to persecute the Christians. And Peter is writing to these Christians, predominantly from a Gentile background, to urge them to keep going, to remain faithful. At the end of the letter in chapter 5 and verse 12, he says that this is the true grace of God. And he wants them to stand fast in it.

And I think that's what makes this letter of 1 Peter so relevant to us as God's people today. That's the situation we're in, I think, in this country. As the opposition and the persecution is increasing.

The pressures of the Christian life, the pressures of Christian mission and on Christian mission are greater. What will keep us going? And we shouldn't be surprised, that is in fact the normal situation for Christians.

[4 : 38] Look how Paul describes these Christians in verses 1 to 3, or 1 to 2 of this passage. They're God's elect. They are God's chosen people who belong to him.

Now, if you think you're God's chosen people, the automatic assumption is to assume that therefore life must somehow be easy. If you've been chosen by God, surely the result should be that life for you is better than for other people.

I was travelling on the aeroplane up to Glasgow this week, and if you go through security, you can now buy a sort of a through the security priority lane that enables you to go through more quickly, without the hassle of queuing and waiting.

And it's easy to think that if you're one of God's chosen people, life is going to be like passing through the priority lane. Well, not at all. Christians are God's people, but they find themselves living in a hostile world.

Peter describes them here as strangers, scattered. Literally, they're exiles. And that's the situation of Christians. We are exiles in our own home country, our own place.

[5 : 49] The world around us is hostile to us because we don't belong to it. And that is the normal situation that Christians have to face. That's the situation that Jesus and the apostles said that his people would have to face.

So what's going to keep us going in this situation as we find ourselves strangers and aliens under increasing pressure? Well, the answer that Peter gives in these opening verses of the letter is the hope of the resurrection.

It's the hope of the resurrection that is fundamental to enabling us as Christians to keep going, to keep living the Christian life, to keep faithful in our mission, to stand fast in the grace that we have received.

It's the resurrection that brings us hope. Death has been defeated. And therefore, living the Christian life, living for Jesus and serving Jesus is worth it in the end.

Because there is a glorious hope for the future. So I want to look at this hope that we have as God's people that will spur us on and encourage us to keep faithful.

[7 : 03] So firstly, we see that what we have is the resurrection gives us hope. The resurrection gives us hope. Have a look at verse 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. See, Peter says that if we're God's people, we have hope.

A living hope. And hope in the Bible, hope for Christians, is not the vague possibility of something in the future. Lots and lots of people in our society today live on the basis of the hope of winning the lottery.

I'm astonished going into the local newsagents at people shelling out 20, 30 pounds a week to buy tickets. In the hope that they might win millions. That is not what the Bible means by hope.

Hope in the Bible is not the hope that Brighton might win the FA Cup. Hope in the Bible is the certainty of something that lies in the future. As the author to the Hebrews writes it, Faith is confidence in what we hope for.

[8 : 15] It's certainty of what lies ahead. And Peter says here, we have a certain future. We have a living hope. And that hope is founded on the resurrection of Jesus.

It's the resurrection of Jesus that gives us this hope. The hope is that death is not the end. That whatever we might face and experience in this life, that is not at the end.

There is a great future for the people of God that goes beyond death. We can live our lives here in the face of the suffering and opposition.

Knowing that even after death we will triumph. And be with the living, risen Lord Jesus. The resurrection gives us hope.

That enables us to face whatever life and whatever a hostile world throws at us. The first challenge I think for all of us is this.

[9 : 18] Do we have this hope? Do we have this sort of hope for the future? Because of the resurrection of Jesus? Do we have the conviction that the resurrection of Jesus is true?

That it's not just a fable or a myth or a story or a nice thought. But that Jesus really died and really rose again. To glorious new life.

Only if we have conviction and confidence that Jesus rose again. Do we ourselves have hope for the future? As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 15. Jesus didn't rise from the dead. We're to be pitied more than all men. Why waste our time living for Jesus? What will we waste our time on Christian mission and ministry? If Jesus is not alive and ruling and reigning at the right hand of God?

So are we convinced that the resurrection is true? That the tomb was empty? And that Jesus rose to glorious new life? And it's important to remember that Jesus didn't just come back to life.

[10:22] It wasn't that Jesus, as it were, simply recovered to the same life he had beforehand. But Jesus was raised to the glorious new life of eternity. Are we convinced that that is true?

The very essence of Christian faith is believing in the resurrection. That Jesus is risen from the dead. I mean, Paul writes in Romans that we are those who believe that Jesus rose from the dead and confess that he's Lord.

It's the heart of Christian faith. Do you have that hope? Well, do you notice this hope is actually only something that we can have because God gives it to us.

We can only receive it as a gift. Peter writes, in his great mercy he's given us new birth into a living hope. It's not enough simply to theoretically believe that Jesus is risen from the dead.

We need to have to be brought into new life in this hope. It's a gift that God gives to us. We need to be born again, is what Peter says here. You don't become a Christian simply by attending church, simply by reading the Bible, simply by coming from a Christian family, or even simply by being baptized.

[11:40] You become a Christian and enter into this hope by being born again, by the work of God, by his spirit. That's a reminder and encouragement to us of how it is people become Christians.

In the end, people become Christians through God's work, by his spirit, giving them new life. The Bible says by nature we are dead. We're dead in the sense that we're separated from God and we're not in relationship with God.

We don't love him and we don't serve him. We want to run from him. But God gives us new birth to spiritual life. And the sign that we've entered into that new birth is we've turned and put our faith in Jesus.

We believe in Jesus because we've been given new birth. It's not the case that we've got new birth because we believe it's the other way around. But this hope is something that's given.

Have you received and been given this hope? Have you been born again? Demonstrated by the fact that you have faith in Jesus.

[12:43] And this is not something that we deserve. Notice again at the beginning of verse 3. It's in his great mercy that God has given us new birth into this living hope.

It's not because we've done anything to deserve it. In fact, exactly the opposite. The Bible says that we deserve God's condemnation. What we deserve is death. But he gives us in his mercy new life. And this new birth comes to people through the gospel message. It's through the preaching of the gospel that people come to receive this new birth and this living hope.

If we were to read on into verse 12, we'd read there about how it is that the Christians that Peter is writing to came to be born again because somebody came and preached the gospel to them.

So that they could believe and trust. And I guess if you're a Christian this morning, you can think back to somebody who preached the gospel to you. It might have been a parent. It might have been a Sunday school teacher.

[13:48] It might have been a friend who shared the good news of Jesus. It might have been through coming to church. It might have been through going to an evangelistic event. It might have been going to an alpha course or a Christianity Explored course.

But somebody preached the gospel. And God in his mercy brought you to new birth. So do you have this hope?

The resurrection gives us hope. A living hope. A hope that goes beyond death. And actually that hope can't be found anywhere else. There is no other religion that offers that hope.

There's no other religion that has a saviour who has conquered death. Science can't offer us that hope. Despite all of the claims and the advances of science, its ability to deal with medical conditions and illnesses, it cannot bring a living hope that goes beyond death.

It's only Jesus that brings that hope. Do you have it? And of course it's that living hope that in the end enables Christians to endure even martyrdom for the faith.

[14 : 57] Because they know that that is not the end of the life. That to die is gain and be with Christ. If you have that living hope of the resurrection, there is nothing the world can do to you to defeat you.

And that's what gives the confidence to live the Christian life. So the resurrection gives us hope. But it gives us hope secondly of a secure inheritance.

Notice that in verse 4. Into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. An inheritance that's kept in heaven. Now an inheritance is something that we will receive in the future.

It's something that we don't have now, but we will have in the future. And Peter is wanting these Christians to know that they have a wonderful, glorious inheritance that awaits them.

Well what is it? What is this inheritance that these Christians are hoping for? Well I think it's nothing less than the new creation. It's nothing less than the renewed world that God is going to recreate.

[16 : 02] The Bible says that this world has become corrupt and ruined as a result of human sin and rebellion against God. But one day God is going to make everything gloriously new.

And those who are God's people, those who have been born again, those who have this living hope, will receive this wonderful inheritance. In the Old Testament, the language of inheritance was used about the promised land.

The promised land was the inheritance that was promised to God's people. And now for those of us who are Christians, that inheritance becomes not just the promised land of Israel, but the entire renewed earth that God promises to his people.

In a sense as we wander around this world, as we wander around our city and our community, we are at the moment strangers and aliens. But the truth of the resurrection and the inheritance that awaits us enables us to look around and say in effect, one day all of this will be mine.

One day all of this will be ours. When Jesus renews everything. His people will inherit the new earth that he is going to bring about.

[17 : 25] The new creation in which there will be no more suffering, mourning, pain or death. And this inheritance is kept absolutely secure.

There are lots of people today who perhaps are looking at their parents and hoping that they might receive an inheritance. But they have that deep fear. They don't know whether or not the money that they might inherit is going to be used up in care home fees.

Or in all sorts of other ways. It's not certain. So there might be a hope of an inheritance. Or maybe their family or their mother or their father might choose in the end to leave it all to the cats or dogs home.

Who knows? We might have a sort of hope that there might be an inheritance. Well actually Peter says the inheritance for us as Christians is absolutely certain.

It's kept safe by God in heaven. It can't perish, spoil or fade. So this hope of the resurrection, this living hope, is a hope of a secure inheritance.

[18 : 29] And I think the implication of that is that we as Christians, we as God's people, we don't have to live just for now. We're liberated from needing to live just for now.

Most people who have no hope and have no hope beyond death, the only option for them is to live just for now. And they do that by living to have as many possessions as they can possibly get.

Or they live that by trying to enjoy as many experiences as they possibly can. There's been a whole plethora of books published along the lines of a hundred things to do before you die.

You see if there's no hope and there's no internal inheritance, that's all there is to live for. Is get as much as you can and do as much as you can before it's all over.

But as Christians, we don't have to live like that. Because we have a glorious inheritance. In the end, we have eternity to enjoy the new creation that God will bring about.

[19 : 36] And that liberates us from the need to live for it now. And thirdly, this living hope of a secure inheritance brings the ability to have joy in suffering.

It brings joy in suffering. See, Peter is realistic. The present experience of these Christians is of suffering. Look at verse 6.

In this you greatly rejoice, though for now, for a little while, you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. So Peter says these Christians are experiencing trials, but yet in the midst of them, they experience joy.

Now just notice, and I think this is very important, Peter is not saying that the joy is the trial itself. He's not saying the joy is in experiencing the trial.

What he's saying here is that because of the living hope, because of the secure inheritance, you have joy even in the midst of the trial. It's that hope that enables us to face the trials.

[20 : 46] So these Christians are greatly rejoicing, even in the midst of the trials that they're experiencing. And the trials that they're experiencing, if we were to read onto the letter, are the mockery for being Christians.

They're being laughed at by their friends and their society. It's the marginalisation. They're being excluded and pushed to the edges.

For some of them, it's even martyrdom. As they perhaps face death when they are wrongly and falsely accused. Those are the trials that they are facing.

They're under pressure to give up their faith and conform to the society around them. And isn't that something that we as Christians face today? Don't we come under the pressure to give in to the values and the attitudes of our society around us?

And if we don't, we face mockery. We face marginalisation. Maybe one day we might even face martyrdom. Or its modern equivalent.

[21 : 51] But it's in the midst of that suffering that these Christians are able to have joy. Because their eyes are focused on the hope and the inheritance that are to come.

As Christians, we have to live by constantly having a forward focus on what lies at the end of the race. And that's what enables us to keep running it.

And Peter wants to encourage these Christians that the sufferings and the trials that they're facing actually have a purpose in God's plan. These sufferings and trials are not a sign that God has somehow failed or let them down.

He's working through them. The purposes of these trials is that their faith might be tested and refined. That their faith might be proved genuine.

And Peter uses the image of kind of metal being refined so that the impurities are burnt off. And its purity is demonstrated.

[22 : 55] God has a purpose in the trials. They've come for this very purpose. So that your faith can be proved genuine. Which will result in giving honour and glory to God.

Actually I think it's relatively easy to be a Christian in an environment in which everybody's a Christian and everybody honours the Christian faith. But actually glory is brought to God when we stand firm for the Christian faith even in a hostile environment.

It's as we stand firm and our faith is shown to be genuine and real. That praise and glory is brought to God. And actually it's having joy in the face of trials which is often a great opportunity for sharing the good news of the gospel with others.

A little bit later in our 1 Peter chapter 3 in verse 15. Peter urges the Christians that when they're experiencing suffering and persecution.

And others look at them and say how are you able to do that? That they're to take the opportunity to give the reason for the hope that they have. It's often in the face of opposition and suffering and difficulties that others around us become aware of our hope.

[24 : 12] And they can't understand why we're still rejoicing even in the face of those sufferings. And it brings great opportunities to speak the good news of the gospel.

So this hope brings joy even in suffering. Just notice in verse 8 and verse 9. These Christians in the face of these trials love Jesus, believe in him, and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy. Because they know they're headed for that eternal inheritance. One of the things that should mark us out as Christians is our joy. An almost inexplicable joy.

Not a joy because life is easy. But a joy that pervades our lives. Because we know we have that glorious inheritance ahead.

As individuals and as churches, if we grasp this hope, we will be filled with that joy. And that will have a real impact on others around us.

[25 : 28] So we have hope because of the resurrection. Of a secure inheritance. Which enables us to have joy in suffering.

And this hope is ultimately the motivation. To keep living the Christian life. And to keep serving the Christian mission. It's this secure hope.

That makes it worthwhile living for Christ. And keeping serving him. You see these opening verses of the letter of Peter.

Are the foundation for the rest of what Peter has to say. And in the rest of this letter he wants to urge the Christians to keep being faithful. In fulfilling the mission that God has for them. But they'll only do that in the face of opposition. If they have this secure hope. Now what Peter calls them to do in the rest of the letter is this. He calls them as God's people to live holy lives.

[26 : 30] The great call is be holy because I am holy. Be set apart for God. And holiness is not just negative. It's not just about things you don't do. It's about being set apart to serve God.

But we'll only be willing to be holy. To be different. To be separate. If we have this hope. Peter then goes on to call the Christians to be faithful in their witness.

And in their mission. In chapter 2 he reminds them. That God has set them apart to be a royal priesthood. A holy nation. They are those who are to bring the good news of God to the rest of the world.

The idea of being a royal priesthood. Goes back to Exodus. When God gave his law to his people at Mount Sinai. And said you're a kingdom of priests. And God's purpose for his people has always been.

That they bring the good news about him to others. That's our job. To be priests to the world. One of the ways that we're to do that is by living good lives amongst the pagans.

[27 : 35] That's what Peter calls the Christians to do. Chapter 2 verse 12 is key to the book. Live such good lives amongst the pagans. That though they accuse you of doing wrong.

They may see your good deeds and glorify God. On the day he visits us. But we're only going to do that. If we've got the hope. And then we're to share the good news of the gospel.

That was 1 Peter 3 verse 15. I spoke about a few moments ago. We're to set apart Christ as Lord in our hearts. So that as we have opportunity.

We're able to give the reason for the hope that we have. Now giving the reason for the hope that we have. Of course means pointing to the resurrection. It means pointing other people to the fact that Jesus has risen.

That he's going to bring about the glorious inheritance. That's the reason for our hope. I wonder when in the last time that you were speaking to somebody else. About the Christian faith.

[28 : 37] You spoke about the resurrection. And the hope it brings. That's what we ought to be doing. And then we're to serve each other. In our 1 Peter chapter 4 verse 10.

The emphasis is on using the gifts that we've been given. To serve each other in the life of the church. Peter writes. Each of you should use whatever gift you've received.

To serve others. For some that may be the gift of hospitality. For others the gift of teaching. For others it may well be the gift of giving.

The gift of sharing. There are a wide variety of gifts that God gives to his people. And we're to use our gifts in service of others.

And all of those things which are key parts of the Christian life and Christian mission are costly. Living holy lives. Bringing the good news to others.

[29 : 35] Living good lives amongst the pagans. Giving the reason for the hope that we have. Using our gifts to serve. They can all be costly. And we'll only do them and keep doing them.

If we have confident hope. In some ways Paul sums it up in 1 Corinthians 15. When he says really there are two ways to live. Just two ways to live.

The first way to live is let us eat drink. Tomorrow we die. There's nothing beyond death. So just get on and enjoy yourself as much as you can. Or alternatively there's what he says at the end of 1 Corinthians 15.

Always give yourself fully to the work of the Lord. Because of the resurrection. Peter's essentially saying the same thing. If we have a living hope of a secure inheritance.

We're able to have joy in our sufferings. And keep going in the Christian life and in our mission. We will be those who live holy lives.

[30 : 38] We'll be those who fulfill our responsibilities as a royal priesthood. Who live good lives amongst the pagans. Who give the reason for the hope that we've got. And use the gifts we've been given in his service.

So are you going to keep going in the Christian life? Are you convinced this is the true grace of God? And you're going to stand firm in it?

Are you going to finish the race? Or are you going to be like Mo Farah? And set off well but give up halfway? Well it's an understanding of the resurrection.

That is key to enabling us to keep going in the Christian life. Peter lays the foundations here. And they're the foundations that each and every one of us needs.

Both as Christians and as a church. Because of the new birth. We have a living hope. Because Jesus has risen from the dead.

[31 : 45] That living hope is of a secure inheritance. Let's keep our eyes focused on it. That living hope and that secure inheritance enable us to have joy.

Even in the face of trials and opposition. So that we can carry on fulfilling our mission. And living for Jesus. Let's pray.

Let's pray.