Believe: *The Virtue of Hope*
1 Peter 1:3-25

The goal of the Christian life is for a sinful, hell-bound person (like me) to eventually become something new—a creature who very much resembles the Son of God. We should note that this goal is not an improvement of the old man—it is a death and a rebirth—it is a transformation from that which once was into something altogether new.

The process for broken, sinful people becoming like the Son of God is not unlike the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly. The process takes time. There is a kind of dying and a rising involved. There is a role to be played by the hairy worm, but ultimately the transformation that takes place exceeds that which the caterpillar could ever account for by his own effort. The end result is, of course, something altogether new...something quite beautiful with a glory that was hidden in its former state. The new creature emerges with glorious wings: and, as such, it is no longer a creature bound to the earth, but one that now graces the heavens! We might also observe that the butterfly was always the fate of the caterpillar, though she could have hardly guessed it as she trudged through the mud and muck of her early days. For the worm to resign herself to her crawling status, resisting the inner promptings to enter the chamber of transformation, would be to deny what the caterpillar’s identity was always intended to be.

So it is with human souls. We were all created for something remarkably more than a life of feeding the appetites and the pursuit of earth-bound pleasures. All of us were created to fly! There is within us all a beautiful, glorious creature waiting to be born. This “new man”—the one who has been born again—is one who reflects the glory of God Himself...she is one whose beauty does not fade. The new creature is one who will live forever in the city of God, even if in this life there are hardships and sufferings along the way. The new creature will also live differently in this age, set apart to some degree, yet vitally engaged in the world’s great pains, because the new creature hosts within him a power so great as to bring healing, help, and hope to those who are perishing.

Now, how will we recognize those who have undergone this mysterious transformation? The Bible tells us that we will recognize them by their virtues...the very virtues of their Lord, Jesus of Nazareth. For the past few weeks we have been examining the virtues of the Christian life: love, joy, peace, and self-control. This morning we shall consider one of the most important and vital of all Christian virtues: hope.

I. The meaning of Hope

Let us first consider what this word “hope” means. Hope may refer to the activity of hoping, or to the object hoped for—the content of one’s hope. By its very nature, hope stresses two things: (a) futurity, and (b) invisibility. It deals with things we can’t see or haven’t received or both.

As Paul writes in Romans 8: Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

So true hope...the kind we all need, is something that gives us an assurance for our future although it is not yet something that we can see. For example: It is the assurance of warm weather, budding trees, and crappies moving into shallow water that gives us hope during the...
long, frigid winter, when all we can see is dead grass covered by snow, right? Winter could crush us if not for the hope of spring. Life will crush us without hope in every domain of our lives.

II. The universal need for hope and our current crisis of hope.
Many writers and students of human behavior have observed that it is impossible to survive very long on planet earth without hope. Hope is to the soul what food is to the body…it is literally the fuel that the human heart runs on. John Ortberg writes, “We can survive the loss of an extraordinary number of things, but no one can outlive hope. When it is gone, we are done.” In his book, If You Want to Walk on Water You Have to Get Out of the Boat, Ortberg lists several examples of hope: Hope is what prompts a young man and woman to stand before a preacher and promise “I do” even though they have no guarantees. Hope is what fuels the same couple, many years later, after broken promises and broken hearts, to give their promise another try. Hope is why human beings keep bringing children into a fallen world. Hope fuels the most basic, essential parts of our lives…but here’s the problem: many writers and students of human behavior agree that our culture is currently experiencing a crisis of hope. Hopelessness is on the rise in America, and the consequences are catastrophic. The NY Times published an article in 2017 entitled, Deaths from drugs and suicide reach a record in the US. In 2017 alone, 150,000 Americans died from drugs and suicide…nearly a third of those (47,173) were suicides. If you remember your history, you might recall that just over 45,000 Americans died in the Vietnam War that went on for over 20 years. So consider this statistic: in just one year…hopelessness killed more Americans than the total number of American soldiers who perished in 20 years of combat in Vietnam. This number of suicides represents an increase of 21% since 1999.

As hopelessness has increased, both the rate of people getting married and the rate of children being born has decreased…significantly. Why? Because as Ortberg just said, marriage and childrearing require hope. We are also seeing large numbers of people simply drop out of the workforce. Why? Because they have no hope…no aspirations…no dreams. Such is why hundreds of thousands are turning to mind-numbing drugs, video games, and pornography as a means of escaping their hopeless existence. These behaviors are particularly common among men and boys in America. USA Today published an article this past week entitled, ‘Boy Crisis’ threatens America’s future with economic, health and suicide risk. According to Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell, one of the greatest threats to the future of America’s economy is peril posed by “young males”: young males not looking for work; being addicted to drugs (opioids in particular); and being unprepared for the transition to technology. The suicide rate of boys is 4 ½ times that of girls between the ages of 20-24. Mass shooters, prisoners, and Islamic State terrorism recruits are at least 90% male. The article also reports that boys and men are dying earlier in 14 out of 15 leading causes of death.

The numbers don’t lie. Our culture is experiencing a significant crisis of hope.

III. Misplaced hope

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I do not have the time or opportunity to dig into all the contributing factors to these shocking statistics, and I suspect there are many factors. But one contributing factor is our tendency to have misplaced hopes. Throughout the centuries human beings have sought to manufacture hope through various means. Some created gods out of wood and placed their hope in the gods of their own making. Others placed their hope in their lovers, their money, their military power, their government, their family, their intelligence or their pursuit of pleasure. But we discover in songs, poetry, and writings throughout the ages that these earthly entities cannot provide the kind of hope that nourishes and sustains the human soul. Misplaced hope usually takes the form of idolatry to some degree. In other words, we place our hope in a perishable source that does not have the power to fulfill our hopes. When our hopes are dashed, we are forced to manufacture hope in some other way or succumb to the suffocating reality of hopelessness.

Now, for most cultures throughout history, some form of a belief in God or the gods has served as a sustaining source of hope for human beings. The belief that there is an unchanging God who will reward good deeds, punish the wrongdoers, and reward the faithful with a beautiful life after death has kept people’s hopes alive throughout the ages. That is still very much the case for many cultures around the world even to this day. However, in the Western world (North America, Europe, Australia), the religion of a God who is there and a heaven to come has been slowly replaced with a godless religion that provides little hope for this life and no hope for a life to come. This new religion based on popular science and atheist philosophers tells us that there is no God, there is no purpose woven into human life, no design, no greater plan, and no heaven after we die. This new religion is supposed to free us to do as we please…to liberate us from the bonds of prudish morality. The new religion makes our own pleasure, fulfillment, and self-actualization the greatest good to be attained. But does this new religion provide hope for the human soul? Preachers of this new religion tells us that our hope is found in man and his machines. We are taught that our hope is found in progress. Our hope is found in presidents and entertainers and the accumulation of goods. Our hope is found in the goodness and kindness that is possible from all those who will be tolerant and inclusive of any and all behaviors. But here is what our soaring suicide rates reveal in no uncertain terms: the promise of hope in this new religion has been tried and found wanting. With no God above, no hope of heaven, no promise that the wrongs will one day be made right, no possibility for forgiveness…our godless culture is suffocating in hopelessness…and friends, that is a crisis indeed.

IV. The Hope of the Gospel

If there is one virtue Christians should demonstrate to a watching world, it is hope! Christianity offers a source of hope that is profound and enduring. The word “hope” appears all throughout the Old and New Testaments with regularity, but I want us to look deeply into one particular passage which beautifully captures the essence of Christian hope.

Let us read together 1 Peter 1:3-21:

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, 7 so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 8 Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and
rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, 9 obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

10 Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, 11 inquiring what person or time 12 the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. 12 It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.

13 Therefore, preparing your minds for action, 14 and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 14 As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, 15 but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, 16 since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” 17 And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one’s deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, 18 knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. 20 He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you 21 who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

Let us observe how the Apostle Peter captures the unique character of the Christian’s hope.

1) Our hope is rooted in the historical claim of Christ’s resurrection. Peter writes, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead…” Our hope for the future must hinge upon an established historical fact that gives us a reason for our hope. The resurrection of Christ provides such a reason. When Christ rose from the dead, He confirmed what most human beings had always suspected: death is not the end. God is there; heaven is for real; there is hope for the life and the life to come. According to the Apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 15, if you could ever disprove the resurrection, “If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain…your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins.” Many have questioned and even sought to disprove the resurrection…all have failed. The evidence for the resurrection of Jesus from Nazareth three days after His public execution on a Roman cross is unparalleled in quality and quantity as compared to any other event said to have taken place in antiquity. The evidence is also supported by reason. In other words, there is not even one alternative explanation that is reasonable which accounts for the explosive growth of the Christian faith after the leader of the faith was executed. If you doubt the historical reliability of the resurrection, I encourage you to pick up a copy of N.T. Wright’s, The Resurrection of the Son of God.

2) Our hope is in a merciful God. Peter makes clear that God is to be blessed, trusted, and praised “according to His great mercy.” How was God merciful? He “caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” Remember…God could conceivably exist and not be merciful…that would make our existence on earth even more horrifying, stripping us of any hope for the life to come. But God demonstrated His love for us in this: while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Romans 5:8. Our merciful God so loved the world that He gave us His only begotten Son, that those who would believe in Him might not perish but be born again into everlasting life.

3) We have a living hope. Why is our hope living? Because Jesus is not dead…Jesus conquered death and became “the firstborn of many brothers,” making it possible for us to also conquer death an inherit eternal life. As Jesus said in John 11, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in
me shall never die.” Our hope is also living because Jesus is with us. After His resurrection Jesus promised His followers in Matthew 28, “I am with you, even to the end of the age.” The awareness of “God with us”—Emmanuel—has served as a living hope for Christians throughout the ages.

4) We have a hope in an inheritance that is coming. Remember, the nature of hope is both futuristic and not yet visible. Peter describes that kind of hope when he writes, “he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.” Christians know that this life is not all there is. In fact, our hope is filled with the promise of an inheritance that awaits those who have been forgiven…those who are now the adopted sons and daughters of King Jesus. In Romans 8 the Apostle Paul writes, “The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, the heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ…” In John 14 Jesus promised His disciples that He was going to prepare a place for them in His Father’s house, and that they would be able to be with Him for eternity. Jesus also assured those who obeyed Him in Matthew 6 that they would actually be storing up “treasures in heaven”…an inheritance set aside for those who are faithful.

5) We have a hope that God’s power is actively working in our lives through faith, even as we wait for what is to come. Peter writes of those who have been born again that they are those “who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” No matter what comes on planet earth, the Christian knows that God is at hand, His power is at work in our lives, because our salvation has already gone into effect, though not all of the benefits of our salvation have yet been revealed. This is what theologians commonly refer to as “the already but not yet” nature of our existence. We are already saved, we are being saved, and we will be saved. Our salvation is a fact, we can count on God’s power and activity in our lives no matter the circumstances as we place our faith in Him, but we still wait for the completion of our salvation when we cross over into the life to come. The Christian’s hope gives us the self-control to wait on the Lord and to not despair.

6) We have hope that even our trials and sufferings serve God’s agenda as our faith is tested and refined. Peter writes, “In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, 6 so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 7 Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, 8 obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. All of the New Testament writers understood that the presence of trials and suffering in the life of a Christian are 1) inevitable and to be expected [John 16]; 2) unable to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ [Romans 8]; and 3) a means by which our faith is tested, and our character refined. Paul writes in Romans 5:2-5, “…we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” In James 1:2-4 we read, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”
Everyone suffers…everyone goes through trials in this fallen age; but the Christian’s hope does not fail is such circumstances. The promises of God, the hope of the Gospel, and the presence of the Holy Spirit give us the power to endure and to grow in seasons of suffering…thanks be to God!

7) Finally, we have a hope that spurs us to action. Some people think of the Christian’s hope as a “pie in the sky” preoccupation that leads the church to ignore the great needs of a hurting culture. But that is not at all the case. Peter writes, 13 Therefore, preparing your minds for action,[b] and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 14 As obedient children do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, 15 but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, 16 since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”

If our hope is in Christ, then we are called to follow Christ into the world as His agents of healing and reconciliation. Our hope calls us to action, to live as those who are holy….which means “set apart.” We are “set apart” not in somehow insulating ourselves from the culture; rather, we are “set apart” because we serve as salt and light in a world that desperately needs to see Jesus and experience His goodness. Our hope leads us to see people as God sees people…and that means we engage people with the hope of the Gospel in word and deed. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5: From now on, then, we regard no one according to the flesh…therefore, if anyone is Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ; God making His appeal through us.

V. Cultivating our Hope
Church, hope is cultivated primarily through what we feed our minds. If you are feeding your mind bad news, violence, pornography, and lies…your hope will suffer immensely. However, if you feed your mind the promises of God and the hope of the Gospel, you will fill your hope bucket and your hope will overflow into the lives of those who struggle to find any hope at all. I would call you again to the discipline of prayer and Bible-study. Call on the name of Jesus in all circumstances throughout your day. Recall the promises of God through memorizing the scripture. Intentionally create reminders in your home, on your calendar, and in your car that point you back to the hope that we have in Christ. Your soul depends on a steady diet of hope…so feed your soul daily through the spiritual disciplines. Do not neglect this practice, lest you fall into despair and lose the hope that Jesus died for you to enjoy.

Church, our culture is hurting. Close to 50,000 souls a year are dying of hopelessness at their own hands. Millions of others are numbing their minds and seeking to escape their hopelessness in various forms of drugs and destructive behaviors. These are those Jesus died to save…they are caterpillars resigned to crawling who do not yet know that they are being called into the chamber of transformation through grace that leads to a new life, one sustained on the wings of hope. There is hope for us all. That hope has a name, and His name is Jesus. We must tell them. Let’s pray.