

1 PETER 1:1-12

THE STORY OF OUR JOURNEY

We all know what this is, and we all know what it is for. It is a suitcase, and it is what we use when we are going on a journey. I place it before you, as we begin the fourth of five scenes in the story of our God, our world and our lives.

The first scene was creation, where our personal, purposeful, powerful God crafted a world of goodness and glory. The second scene was the fall, where our rebellion led to the pain and death we see and suffer. The third scene was redemption, where Jesus came to rescue people from the guilt and power of sin, and free them to a new life with God.

The fourth scene is the scene of mission. After God redeems his people, he calls them to live for him in his world. We will unfold this scene through the words of Peter's first letter.

Peter probably wrote this letter from Rome. Later on, he mentions "Babylon," but he seems to be using Babylon as a symbol for Rome - the most powerful city in the world at that time. He is writing to churches scattered throughout the land known as Asia Minor, which is now the nation of Turkey. We believe he wrote in the early '60s A.D. - maybe just before the Roman Emperor Nero began to pursue and kill Christians, including Peter himself.

Peter calls his readers "strangers in the world." The word translated "stranger" describes a group of people who are not permanent residents of a place, but on a lifelong journey. They are like people who live out of suitcases. This is true of us for two reasons:

First, we are all fallen creatures - believer and unbeliever alike. With sin comes death. We are all on a short journey here that will lead to a journey to somewhere else - forever.

Second, through Jesus Christ, we are redeemed sinners. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, God is changing your itinerary. He is redirecting your journey toward himself and his purposes.

Because we are both fallen creatures and redeemed sinners, we are "strangers in the world," and our journey will not be easy. Peter writes to encourage us to live with a joy-filled mission for Jesus in a joy-robbing world. As he begins, he offers truths that will direct us on the journey. In his greeting, he offers a blessing of "grace and peace." These are not empty words. He knows we deeply need God's grace and peace for this journey. Let's use the first word, grace, to guide us through Peter's words here. He leads us to God's past grace, present grace, and future grace.

He starts with **PAST GRACE**. Before he calls his readers "strangers in the world," he calls them God's "elect." They (and we) are chosen by the Father, for the Son, and through the Spirit.

We are *CHOSEN BY THE FATHER*. In verse 2, Peter declares that these believers in Jesus are believers in Jesus, because of "the foreknowledge of God the Father." We read the English translation, and we may think this means that God merely knew who would believe. But the word here describes more than a knowledge of information. It declares a knowledge of affection - an affection we also see in the word "Father." God has not just known who would believe. He has loved those he has chosen to believe. Before we knew him, he loved us. Even before the creation, he loved his people, and he chose them to be his own children.

We are also *CHOSEN FOR THE SON*. In verse 2, Peter describes the elect as chosen "for obedience to Jesus Christ." This obedience is a response to the cross, where Jesus died to redeem his people from their sins. But while Peter will describe that later, he begins by emphasizing the fact that Jesus' redeeming work is a renewing work. We are saved to obey Jesus. We have been chosen for life in the Son, so that we may live for the Son. He has called us to live for him in this world, as we journey through this world.

We are chosen by the Father, for the Son, and we are *CHOSEN THROUGH THE SPIRIT*. We wonder, "How does this all happen?" Peter writes that this is "through the sanctifying work of the Spirit." Then in verse 3, he refers to the "new birth." This is the event we call "regeneration." The word "generation" describes the giving of life. So when something is regenerated, it is given new life. We are fallen, sinful, rebellious

creatures. Our hearts are hard and our spirits are dead. But then the Holy Spirit turns us away from that hardness and deadness, and he turns us to faith in the holy, risen Savior named Jesus. We believe in him, and we are ready to follow him. We have not done this on our own. Through the work of the Spirit in us, we embrace the blessings of the Father and the Son.

In verses 10-12, Peter writes of the Old Testament prophets and how they “searched intently and with the greatest care” about all of this. They knew a Savior was coming, but they did not know when. Now it has all been revealed. It is mysterious and wonderful - so amazing that Peter writes that even angels are fascinated by this. They “long to look into these things.”

Past grace. If we are to journey well for Jesus, we must know this grace well - not just in our minds, but in our hearts. These truths must ooze into every pore of our souls. They are the emblems of God’s past grace. They remind us of who we are, as we set out on the journey of our mission for Jesus.

Speaking of suitcases...when our mission team journeyed to Sierra Leone earlier this year, one of the team leaders had a great idea. He gave everyone on the team a piece of a long, bright ribbon, and he told them to tie a portion of the ribbon around the handles of their baggage. Those ribbons would be a sign for them, and for everyone else, that those bags were theirs. Those identifying markers enabled them to journey well together.

We are chosen by the Father. He has loved us forever. We are chosen for the Son. We are his people. We are chosen through the Spirit. He has given us new life. Those are the “ribbons” of past grace that we tie to our minds and our hearts, as we set out on this journey.

We will see the importance of this all through the book, but we sense it now. The journey will be difficult. Sometimes we will suffer because we are fallen creatures, as everyone does. But sometimes we will suffer because we are redeemed sinners. If we journey for Jesus, we will be opposed and even oppressed. We must use this past grace to survive and thrive. We must recall who we are, and we must revel in who we are, and we must keep these truths firmly in our minds and close to our hearts, even through severe suffering.

Does God love me in this trial? Is Jesus for me in this struggle? Will the Spirit help me as I suffer? Yes, yes and yes. I know this, as I tie those truths of past grace upon my mind and heart, every day.

Then, **PRESENT GRACE**. After Peter’s words of greeting and blessing, he bursts into praise - praise for the present grace of God’s power, and praise for the present grace of God’s purpose.

“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, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade - 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. Peter rejoices in *THE GRACE OF GOD’S POWER* by providing the image of a shield. In battle, shields protect warriors. Today’s shields may have more sophistication and sturdiness, but the idea is the same - they provide strength and safety to stand against strong force.

This is the present grace of God for his people. Peter declares that until the day of Jesus’ return, God is busy about protecting his people. We are weak. He is strong. We are vulnerable. He is unbeatable. We need protection from the spiritual assaults of human and angelic enemies. We have such protection through the power of the God who raised his Son from the dead. He is strong to save, and he is strong to secure the ones he has saved.

But present grace includes not only the grace of God’s power, but *THE GRACE OF GOD’S PURPOSE*. Let’s learn a little Greek: three little letters with big significance. We say them this way in English: “hina.” Translation: “so that.” It is here, and it is everywhere in this letter. God does this, “so that...” In other words, God has a purpose. In verse 6, we read that we may have grief in all kinds of trials. But, “These have come so that your faith - of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire - may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”

God has a purpose. His purpose is the strength of your faith, and his purpose is that your faith may be “proved genuine.” The word here describes testing something - not with a plan for failure, but with a desire for

success. God gives us trials, not to take us down, but to lift us up. He is not trying to get us. He is trying to grow us. Peter reveals here that whatever sufferings we face - as fallen creatures, but especially as redeemed sinners - have a purpose. They are for the proving and improving of our faith, as we live in God's present grace.

Speaking of suitcases...one of my wife's favorite stories of our courtship is the tale of the day she flew home for Christmas break from college, and I drove her to the Pittsburgh airport. In those days, Beth Ann was not exactly a light packer. Her suitcase was about four times the size of this one, and its weight matched its size. To make matters worse, I had not been inside the Pittsburgh airport often, so we entered at the opposite end of where we needed to be. But I hauled that suitcase, along with everything else she had, through that entire airport, so she could get on that plane.

She says, "That's when I knew he loved me." I say, "What else was I going to do - just leave her there in the middle of the Pittsburgh airport?" We laugh, but that was a memorable moment. By God's strength, I hauled the suitcase. In God's purpose, my love for her was proved genuine and even lasting.

The present grace of God's power - who shields us. The present grace of God's purpose - even through suffering. If we are to journey well for Jesus, we must be convinced of this. His power will make us strong, and his purpose will make our faith more pure and enduring.

When we lose sight of this present grace, we become discouraged, and we may even begin to drift from our Lord. We lose a sense that we are on a mission. All we can see is the struggle. We wonder why this has happened, and we question whether our lives even have a direction - or whether we are on a journey to nowhere. We doubt we can hold on.

But when we keep sight of this present grace, we live with confidence and even boldness. In even the worst of trials, we know God's power is great enough to strengthen and protect us through the struggle. In even the darkest of hours, we know God has a purpose. We may not know the details of the purpose or even the direction of the purpose. But we know the past grace that has secured us to God as our Father, so we know the present grace of his eternal power and purposes. In this present grace of power and purpose, we stand in our mission for Jesus.

Past grace. Present grace. **FUTURE GRACE.**

Speaking of suitcases...we like them, don't we? They represent something good to us. As we pull them out, we have a sense of anticipation about what we will be doing. Yes, sometimes we grab them because of a dreaded business trip or a difficult family situation. But often, we take them in hand because we know we are going somewhere exciting. Maybe it is just a weekend away at a state park. Or maybe it is a trip to see great family or good friends. Or maybe it is one of those once-in-a-lifetime journeys to a place like Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon, or even Europe, Asia or Africa. Quite often, the sight of a suitcase stirs hope and spurs joy.

With future grace, we possess a real hope and a true joy that is better than any journey we can ever take in this life. Let's return to Peter's words and see first how we have *A LIVING HOPE*. Listen to verse 3 again: "In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that will never perish, spoil or fade..." Then remember verse 9: "...you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls."

Peter is reminding his readers that this life journey is for a "little while." In the midst of trial and suffering, it may seem so long, but it is a journey with an end, and with Jesus Christ in your heart and life, it is a journey with the end of an eternal inheritance. The Bible never, ever diminishes the reality of suffering. But the Bible often puts that suffering into perspective, by reminding God's people of the living hope we have in heaven through Jesus.

But this is not just a living hope. This is *A LIVING, JOY-GIVING HOPE*. Listen to the joy of verse 6: "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials." Hear the joy of verse 8: "Though you have not seen him (Jesus), 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..."

This living hope is a joy-giving hope, for without this hope, our joys are short-lived. We may gain and gain and gain in this life, but it will all be lost, and all so soon. Yet the inheritance Jesus provides will never perish, spoil or fade, for it is kept in heaven, as you await the day when you go to be where he is, and you anticipate the day when he will return to be where you are, as he brings the new heavens and the new earth, where righteousness dwells.

But remember the scene we are now entering: the scene of mission. These ideas of hope and joy are not just for us. They are at the heart of our mission for Jesus. We live in a culture where we chase happiness by chasing false “gods”: people, money, power, fame, pleasure, control, and a thousand other “idols” we construct in our hearts and serve in our lives. We are fully engaged in the “pursuit of happiness” that we believe we will find in these “gods,” but we are among the most miserable people in the world, for they will always disappoint us and never satisfy us.

So here is the heart of our mission: in Jesus Christ, we offer real joy and true hope. In a world that clamors for fleeting and fleeing happiness, we bring the living, joy-giving hope of Jesus Christ. We seek it for ourselves, and we show it to others.

The gospel declares, “You who kill yourself to die rich, come to real joy and true hope. You who have given your hearts to people who have failed and broken you, come to real joy and true hope. You who seek a momentary high in a pill or a picture, come to real joy and true hope. You who live in fear and seek to control everything about everything, come to real joy and true hope. You who see the years slipping away, and can no longer deny the reality of death, come to real joy and true hope.” This is the message of our mission.

But before we do this and as we do this, we must have a firm grasp of that future grace for ourselves. Our former Associate Pastor, Dale Kulp, said more than once, “We need to think more about heaven.” This is not so that we wander around, clueless and useless. This is so that we keep our present trials in the right perspective, and so that we may be free to rejoice in that hope, and filled to deliver that hope to people who are being starved by the fake joys and false hopes of this short journey.

Past grace: chosen by the Father, for the Son, through the Spirit. Present grace: the grace of God’s power and purpose. Future grace: a living, joy-giving hope. It is the message that should fill our minds and hearts, and it is the mission that should flavor all that we say and do.

Speaking of suitcases...whenever I pack this suitcase or any suitcase, I know there are things I must pack before I leave. Some things I can leave behind and suffer no harm, but other things I must take. My wife is great about reminding me of what I tend to forget as I pack.

As Peter begins our mission journey, he reminds us of the truths that must be in the suitcases of our hearts, during this scene of this story. Without these truths, we become discouraged, directionless, and even despairing. With these truths, we know who we are before God, we know how we can stand before suffering, and we know we have something to offer before people who desperately need the true God.

Are you ready for this journey?