

THERE IS HOPE

Six Bible studies by Paul Beasley-Murray based on
There is Hope: Preaching at Funerals (IVP December 2021)

INTRODUCTION: CHRISTIAN HOPE IS RESURRECTION HOPE

“May the God of all hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Rom 15.13)

The good news is that there is hope – for God raised Jesus from the dead! “God”, wrote the Apostle Peter, “has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Pet 1.3). It was “concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead” that the Apostle Paul was on trial (Acts 23.6: see also 26,6).

This resurrection hope is at the heart of Christian believing. What a difference this hope makes. When Cardinal Hume, a former Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, was diagnosed with terminal cancer, he rang to tell his friend, Timothy Wright, the Abbott of Ampleforth, who replied: “Congratulations! That’s brilliant news. I wish I was coming with you!” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was put to death by Hitler’s henchmen, evinced a similar confidence in life after death, when he declared: “Death is the supreme festival on the road to freedom”. As he was taken away to be hanged, he said to a British fellow-prisoner, “This is the end. For me the beginning of life”.

Christian hope is not a whistling in the dark but is sure and certain. In the Church of England's committal service, the dead are committed to be buried or cremated

“in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our frail bodies that they may be conformed to his glorious body, who died, was buried, and rose again for us”.

Christian hope is not a form of optimism. Rather Christian hope is based upon a past reality. For the Bible teaches that in rising from the dead Jesus blazed a trail through the valley of the shadow down which those who have put their trust in him may follow too. In the words of Jesus, with which I begin every funeral: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live" (John 11:25).

Over the years I have had many occasions to study the New Testament documents. As a PhD student I devoted three years of my life to examining the implications of the resurrection of Jesus for the early church. Later, after using a sabbatical to study further the resurrection, I wrote a book for preachers on *The Message of the Resurrection* . Today I am more convinced than ever that God raised Jesus from the dead, and that in doing so he broke down death's defences for all who believe

1. THE HOPE OF LIFE BEYOND THE GRAVE (JOHN 11.1-44)

Lazarus was the brother of Mary and Martha (11.1-2). We hear about Mary and Martha in Luke's Gospel (Luke 10.38-41), but there is no reference to Lazarus. He only appears in John's Gospel. Who was he? I am attracted to the suggestion that Lazarus suffered from a disability. Margaret Magdalen, a former British Baptist who joined an Anglican community of nuns, wrote:

“It was an unusual *ménage à trois*. Why was Lazarus not married – given that marriage was obligatory for Jewish men with few exceptions? Why, too, were Martha and Mary unmarried since normally they would have been engaged, betrothed and married whilst still fairly young.... Was Lazarus perhaps handicapped – physically, mentally, or both? If so, it would help to explain the unusual composition of the household, the unmarried state of (it would seem) all three, and the intense grief of the sisters which was later to be shared by Jesus. A source of quite unique love would have been taken from them, for any of us who have lived amongst handicapped people will know all that is captured in that word ‘unique’”

All we really know about Lazarus is what we find here in John's Gospel. Lazarus means ‘He whom God helps’ – a very appropriate meaning in the light of John 11.

Mary, Martha and Lazarus lived in Bethany, which was “near Jerusalem, some two miles away” (11.18) It is the same village where according to the other Gospels Jesus stayed when he was

visiting Jerusalem (see, for instance, Mark 11.11-12; 14.4). It seems to have become a bolthole for Jesus.

“Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus” (11.5). Clearly, they meant a great deal to him. Their home was a haven of rest in the midst of unrelenting turbulence outside. Yet even this special family was hit by trouble. I find that significant: the people whom the Lord really loved were had to go through a terrible crisis in their lives. True, there was a happy ending, but at the time Mary and Martha did not know that. The first words of both of them to Jesus were: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died!” (11.21, 32). This was no mere statement of fact, but an expression of resentment. In that regard they were no different from us. In our anguish we begin to cry out against God, if not actually curse him. God’s actions – if God’s they are – are sometimes baffling. However, Jesus said: “This illness does not lead to death of Lazarus; it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it” (11.4). My experience is that where the inevitable questioning takes place within the context of trust rather than of bitterness, God is able to bring about something good (see Rom 8.28). However, Mary and Martha had not that perspective. They were deeply upset (11.19) - they had lost their brother.

Jesus also was upset. For when “Jesus saw Mary weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved” (11.33). Or was another emotion present? The word translated as “greatly disturbed” (NRSV) or as “deeply moved” (NIV & ESV) was an expression of anger. Luther in his translation has Jesus snarling at death which binds his friend in death.

“Jesus began to weep” (11.35) says John – the shortest verse in the Bible. Was it because of grief for Lazarus? Yet Jesus within a matter of moments was calling Martha to believe (11.40) Or were the tears motivated by the unbelief that caused him anger?

This is the context in which Jesus came to tomb and ordered that the stone blocking the entrance be removed (11.38, 39). Martha, as practical as ever, objected: “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days” (11.39). According to popular Jewish belief of that day, the body bursts on the fourth day and the soul which has hovered over the body until then, finally departs. One thing for certain: Lazarus was well and truly dead (see 11.14).

But for Lazarus death was not the end. Jesus insisted that the stone to the entrance be removed. from the entrance to his tomb. He then “looked upward” to heaven (11.41) and prayed. This is the only prayer recorded in the Gospels by Jesus prior to his working a miracle. Here we have a reminder that Jesus did not operate in his own strength – he was dependent upon his Father. In his brief prayer he affirmed his faith in his Father God: “Father, I thank you for having heard me” (11.41).

Then Jesus “cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out’” (11.43). “The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth” (11.44). Lazarus was “a cadaver wrapped from head to toe” (*The Message*). He could only have shuffled out of the tomb!

It is an incredible story – the mind boggles! But this was no ordinary man who commanded him to come out of the tomb. This was Jesus, the Son of God, and with Jesus nothing is impossible. True, eventually Lazarus died. In fact we should not use the ‘resurrection’ word for Lazarus’ – he was simply resuscitated. But for John the story of Lazarus’ return to life is a ‘sign’ of the resurrection hope that is ours in Jesus. The life that Jesus gave Lazarus points to the new life that Jesus will give those who trust him today. The key statement in this story is where Jesus faced up Martha with the reality of this life he offers when he declared: “I *am* the resurrection and the life. (11.25). Jesus not only gives life – he is life! He then draws out the meaning of this statement in the following two parallel clauses : “Those who believe, even though they die; will live; and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (11. 26). Those who believe are promised a share in a resurrection yet to come; and those who have a share in the life of the kingdom of God will never die.

What wonderful words these are! But notice these words of hope are addressed to those who are prepared to believe. To Martha Jesus said: “Do you believe this?” (11.26). In one sense Martha already believed in life after death. For when Jesus said, “Your brother will rise again”, she had replied somewhat mechanically, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day” (11.24). ‘Sure, he’ll rise – I’ve heard that one before’. But at that moment she was just mouthing a platitude – this thought brought no comfort to her heart. Then all of a sudden an intellectual creed translated itself into true faith: “Do you believe this”, asked Jesus. ‘Do you believe that I am the resurrection and the life?’ “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son

of God” (11.27). She believed in a way she had never believed before. C.S. Lewis wrote in the context of his wife’s death:

“You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth and falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you. It is easy to say you believe a rope to be strong and sound as long as you are merely using it to cord a book. But suppose you had to hang by that rope over a precipice. Wouldn’t you then discover how much you really trusted it?”

For discussion:

1. Grieving is part of the cost of loving. Not surprisingly tears abounded after the death of Lazarus. Yet today in many funeral services there is little opportunity for mourners to express their loss. Instead the focus is on thanksgiving and celebration. Do we need to make more room for tears?
2. Jesus wept. Gordon Bridger suggested that if his tears were “in sorrow at the sense of desolation and loss that death brought to those who were still in the dark about the future life”, then “this story assures us that Jesus understands and cares about human sorrow” What do you think? To what extent do his tears bring comfort to you?
3. Jesus calls us to place our hope in him as “the resurrection and the life”. What difference has Jesus made to you when you have lost a loved one?
4. What else has struck you from studying this passage?

2.A HOPE TO HOLD ON TO (JOHN 14.1-6)

It was the night before he was to die. Judas Iscariot had left the table (John 13.27). Jesus knew that it was a matter of an hour or two before he would be arrested and put on trial. It was then that Jesus began to say farewell to his disciples.

Yet the disciples had only thoughts for themselves. Jesus had just spoken of betrayal. He had just foretold Peter's denial (13.38). 'What next?' the disciples must have wondered. This is the context in which Jesus said: "Do not let your hearts be troubled" (14.1); "do not be worried and upset" (GNB). Telling a person not to be nervous and not to be anxious, does not normally help those who are 'on the edge', but here Jesus is the speaker.

Jesus' remedy for fear is to "believe in God" and to "believe also in me". To all intents and purposes Jesus was putting himself on the same level with God.

The grammar is significant. The underlying Greek contains a series of present imperatives: 'Stop letting your hearts be troubled', instead 'Keep on believing in God, and keep on believing in me'. The disciples already were believers – but now Jesus calls them to continue to believe in God, and to continue to believe in him.

Jesus went on to present his disciples with a reason for believing: "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you" (14.2). The AV speaks of 'mansions', a term which then denoted 'a dwelling place', whereas today it suggests a large house or

even a stately pile. By contrast Luther's rendering *Wohnungen* suggests in present day German a flat or an apartment, which is perhaps reflected in the NIV & ESV translation of 'rooms'. Yet, the underlying Greek noun simply suggests a place to stay.

Jesus said he would "go to prepare a place" for his disciples This had nothing to do with making beds and ensuring that everything was in order for future guests. Rather Jesus prepared a place for his disciples through his death, resurrection and ascension. Then in God's good time, he said. "I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also" (14.3). Here we have a clear promise of the Second Coming of Christ.

It is possible that Jesus was almost 'baiting' his disciples by adding: "You know the way to the place where I am going" (14.4). Not surprisingly Thomas, the loyal but undiscerning disciple (see 11.16) voices the incomprehension of the rest of the group: "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" (14.5).

Jesus replied: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (14.6). As Thomas' question reveals, the emphasis is on Jesus being the way: he is "the true and living way". This is confirmed by Jesus speaking of coming to the Father through him alone. In today's pluralistic world this has proved to be one of Jesus' most controversial of statements. How dare Jesus make such a claim? What about Muhammad, Confucius and the Buddha? Are they not the way too? Are there not many paths to God? Those who would like a more inclusive expression of the Christian faith would much prefer Jesus to have referred to himself as 'a way'. The reality is

that Jesus is the one and only way to God. So what about those who have never heard of Jesus? There are no easy answers. However, this verse does not address the ways in which Jesus brings people to the Father, but simply says that no one who ends up sharing God's life will do so apart from Jesus.

Questions for discussion

1. The grieving process can take anywhere between two to five years, and in some cases even longer. In this context to what extent does the call of Jesus to "keep believing" have a particular relevance? In your own struggle with grief have there been occasions when you doubted God and his love?
2. "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places". Heaven is as wide as the heart of God – in heaven there is room for all. Why is it that so many people fail to respond to God's love? How can we more effectively share the good news of God's love with friends and family?
3. What do you think heaven will be like? Some have envisaged themselves twanging on their harps along with the angels. According to the Koran, "For the god-fearing awaits a place of security, gardens and vineyards, and maidens with swelling breasts" (Sura 78.30-34). Jesus said: "Where I am, there you may be also". To what extent is it enough for you that heaven is where Jesus is.
4. What else has struck you from studying this passage?

3. A HOPE OF VICTORY (1 COR 15.3-5, 20, 24-28, 54-57)

Paul begins his great chapter on the resurrection by quoting from an early Christian creed (15.3-5) which stated that:

Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures,
he was buried,
he was raised on the third day in accordance with the
scriptures,
he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve"

On closer examination, these four affirmations can be reduced to two propositions: "Christ died" and "Christ was raised" - the 'being buried' and 'appearing to Cephas (Peter) and the Twelve' simply strengthen these two basic propositions.

First, "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures" (15.3). The Greek preposition translated "for", normally means 'on behalf of' and is usually used of persons: e.g. "God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us" (Rom 5.8). What we have in 1 Cor 15.3 is probably a form of shorthand, viz. Christ died 'on our behalf to deal with' our sins.

Secondly, "He was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures". The passive mood, "he was raised", indicates that God is the implied subject: Jesus did not so much rise, as God raised him and in doing so vindicated his death on the Cross. The resurrection is God at work. The tense too is significant. In the other three lines of this creed a simple Greek past (aorist) is used: viz. he "died", "was buried", and "appeared"; but in this line the verb is in the Greek perfect, which expresses a past action with

consequences in the present. Christ was raised to life and lives for evermore is the implication. Christ is alive! This Greek perfect is repeated throughout the chapter when Paul is referring to Christ (15.12, 13,14,16,17,20). The reference to "the third day" is a simple fact of history. Jesus was crucified on a Friday. Yet when the women went to the tomb early on the morning of the first day of the week (Sunday) he had risen. What happened was an event, and not just an experience. This phrase may also underline the reality of Christ's death: his body lay in a tomb for more than two days and no doubt in that time began to decompose. By implication, this fact of decomposition offers hope to us: for if God could transform his decomposing body when he raised his Son from the dead, so too he can do the same for us!

Precisely because God raised Jesus from the dead, there is hope for us. Midway through the chapter Paul declares, "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died" (15.20); literally, "the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (so NIV & ESV). The expression "the first-fruits" recalls the first sheaf of the grain harvest that was ceremonially waived in the Temple at the Jewish Feast of Weeks as a token of a greater harvest to come (see Lev 23.9-14). This Feast of Weeks coincided with the Passover Festival. In using this metaphor Paul may have been conscious that Jesus rose from the dead about the same time as the sheaf of the first-fruits was being offered in the temple. The resurrection of Jesus is a sign to all the world of a great harvest of life to come. To put it another way, "Christ has been raised from death, as the guarantee that those who sleep in death will also be raised" (1 Cor 15.22 GNB). Or in the words of Eugene Peterson's paraphrase: "Christ has been raised up, the

first in a long legacy of those who are going to leave the cemeteries" (*The Message*)

This leads Paul to look forward to the day when Jesus "hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power" (1 Cor 15.24-28). These enemy forces may be likened to "forces of structural or corporate evil that threaten to oppose the reign of Christ or to overwhelm God's people" (Anthony Thistleton). "For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet" (15.25). The ultimate enemy is "death" (15.26). Contrary to those who believed in the immortality of the soul and viewed death as a friend who freed people from their bodies, Paul refused to make light of death. As the world has yet again discovered through its experience of the coronavirus pandemic, death is a ruthless enemy. However, death's days are numbered. For God in raising Jesus from the dead inflicted although through the resurrection of Jesus death has already suffered a mortal blow. Sin and death may still bring damage and sorrow; but they are no longer decisive forces.

"The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (15.26). Significantly Paul uses a present tense: death is being "destroyed". This may indicate that death is already in the process of losing its power.

When Death has been subdued and Christ has handed over the kingdom to God the Father, then God will be "all in all" (15.28). God will be supreme. Creation will have been restored.

As Paul draws to a close his great chapter on resurrection, he looks forward to the day when God's victory over death will be

complete (15.54-57). “Death has been swallowed up in victory” (15.54). Paul is quoting an amended form of Isaiah 25.8, where the word “victory” has replaced the original “for ever to highlight the “victory” that is ours in Christ.

Paul pursues the theme of victory by mocking death, whose fate has been sealed. He loosely quotes from Hosea 13.14: “Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death is your sting”. For whereas the Septuagint refers to the “penalty” of the “grave”, Paul speaks of the “victory” over death. These slight changes should not cause concern. Paul was not grounding his argument in the Old Testament; rather his argument was grounded in the “victory” Christ has already gained in the resurrection.

The “sting of death” (15.56).is not some mild irritant, but is like a scorpion’s sting (see Rev 9.10). Christ has drawn out the poison, absorbing it in his own person on the Cross To use the language of Hebrews, in “tasting death” he has “destroyed him who has the power of death” (Heb 2.9,14) The victory is indeed ours “through our Lord Jesus Christ” (15.57).

This causes Paul to conclude with a doxology: “Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (15.56). The use of the present tense is significant: already the victory is ours. For us death has already lost its power.

Questions for discussion

1. In a 2017 BBC survey 25% of those who described themselves as Christians did not believe in the resurrection of Jesus, and that 31% did not believe in life after death? Yet in 1 Cor 15.3-5

the resurrection of Jesus is at the heart of Christian believing. How do you account for this discrepancy? How has the hope of resurrection become so marginal to so many?

2. In a 2018 survey of attitudes to death in the UK, 34% of Christians felt unable to talk about death with family and friends. 'Death has a sharper sting for the faithful' reported *The Times*. In the light of 1 Cor 15, how can we encourage our fellow believers to be more confident in their faith?
3. If Sunday is the day of resurrection, then we not sing at least one resurrection hymn every Sunday?
4. What else has struck you from studying this passage?.

4. HOPE FOR THE DYING (2 TIM 4.6-8)

Paul has just given Timothy an 'ordination charge' (4.1-5) culminating with the call to "carry out your ministry fully" (4.5); "discharge all the duties of your ministry" (NIV). Timothy still would have many years of ministry ahead of him, but Paul knew he was coming to the end of his ministry. "As for me" (4.6 NRSV: also GNB; RNJB), says Paul. He uses the emphatic first-person singular pronoun to draw a contrast between himself and Timothy. He is passing on the baton to his younger colleague.

"I am already being poured out as a libation" (4.6) The GNB translates: "the hour has come for me to be sacrificed", but strictly speaking, a libation accompanied a sacrifice rather than was itself a sacrifice. Drink offerings were the final ritual to the daily animal sacrifice and were poured out at the base of the altar (see Num 13.5, 7; 15.1-12). Similarly, in the Greco-Roman

world of sacrifice, there was a ritual involving libations. The key point that Paul is making is that the sacrificial process has begun. The verb he uses is in a perfect past tense which emphasises the imminence of the end. Paul knew that he might still have another winter of imprisonment (hence he asks Timothy in 2 Tim 4.13 to bring his cloak). In Romans he had described the Christian life as a whole as “a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” (Rom 12.1): now the time had come to turn the metaphor into reality and for the sacrifice to be complete.

“The time of my departure has come” declares Paul. The Greek word translated as ‘departure’ denotes a separation of one item from another and can be used to denote the loosening of a ship from its mooring. This word for ‘casting off’-was often used as a euphemism for death, which was seen as a journey to the underworld or afterlife. Death was viewed as a transition, not an end itself. Paul uses the cognate verb in Phil 1.23, where in the context of death (Phil 1.21) he states: “my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better”. For Paul death is the moment when the anchor is weighed, the ropes are slipped, and the boat sets sail for another shore – the shore of eternity, where God is to be found.

Paul is remarkably calm at this point. Sadly, some Christians find the thought of ‘casting off’ not easy to accept, and as a result find it difficult to ‘let go’ of this life. In the words of a former palliative care specialist: “They continue to talk about getting better in spite of objective evidence of deterioration... Sadly, often such people ‘die badly’. They are like someone standing on a jetty with one foot in a boat and one on land. As the two drift apart, there comes a point where the tension will no longer hold, and in dying

patients, this may be resolved by a retreat from reality into confusion and unreachable anxiety. Here the only useful answer could be appropriate sedation.” Dying well involves letting go, while holding on to God. The motto of Spurgeon’s College, of which I was Principal, comes to mind: *‘teneo et teneor’*: ‘I hold and I am held’.

Paul then makes three ‘staccato-like’ declarations, where each begins with a direct object and concludes with a ‘perfect’ tense verb. The word order in Greek runs:

the good fight I have fought
the race I have finished
the faith I have kept

The translation of the first declaration is disputed. The NRSV, along with the NIV, ESV & RNJB, has Paul say: “I have fought the good fight”. However, the GNB & REB believe that Paul was speaking not of a “fight” but of a race, which is then expanded into the second declaration. So the GNB reads: “I have done my best in the race. I have run the full distance”; similarly the REB translates: “I have run the great race, I have finished the course”. The underlying Greek word is not clear, for it can be used both of a fight and of a race. I think that Paul had in mind a long-distance race like a marathon, which only ends when life ends.

Whatever, the metaphor implies, Paul’s overall meaning is clear: the struggle, the effort., the straining of every sinew with every muscle aching, will soon be over. In the meantime, the race needs to be completed. In this regard the English translations are misleading. The NRSV translation (“I have fought the good fight, I

have finished the good race.”) gives the impression that the struggle is over, whereas the tense used is a Greek perfect – which implies a past action which continues into the present. The bell has sounded and there is one final bout or lap to endure!

As Paul looks back on the contest that has lasted almost three decades and that is now almost over, he is content with his performance: it has been a “good” contest.

This leads Paul then to make his third declaration: “I have kept the faith”. Again this is a Greek past perfect: this is not a one-off event in the past, but a past action which continues into the present. Paul has kept and continues to keep the faith. He has been true to the faith which was entrusted to him and when in then entrusted to Timothy. What God had called him to do, he had done. He had been faithful to the last. In declaring “I have kept the faith”, Paul was not boasting, but was saying, as it were, ‘Thank God, I kept the faith’.

From looking backwards, Paul turns to look forwards: “From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness” (4.8). In athletic contests of ancient Greece victors were awarded a laurel wreath. The prize here, however, is no laurel wreath, but eternal life: i.e. life lived in the presence of God together with all those who have gone ahead of us

But in what respect is this a “crown of righteousness”? Is it a crown that consists in final righteousness? Paul wrote in Gal 5.5 “For through the Spirit by faith we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness”. This is what the GNB understands Paul to say and so renders this phrase: “now there is waiting for me the victory

prize of being put right with God”. Or is it the crown that is the reward for righteousness? James wrote: “Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him” (Jas 1.12); and Peter wrote: “When the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away” (1 Pet 5.4). The truth is that either interpretation is possible.

What is certain is that this crown will be given by “the Lord, the righteous judge” (4.8). There is a degree of irony here, for Paul was about to stand before an unrighteous judge, who would condemn to death. However, Paul was confident that God’s higher court would reverse the judgment of the lower court.

Note too that this crown of righteousness is not reserved for the great athletes of the faith like Paul, but is for “all who have longed for his [the Lord’s] appearing” (4.8). In a normal race, there is only one winner, but here all are champions – or at least all who persevere to the end!

Questions for discussion

1. In a recent survey 20% of those interviewed admitted to fearing both the way they will die and death itself. By contrast Paul exhibits no fear, even although he must have known that his approaching death would be violent – the axman would have his neck! To what extent are you fearful of death?
2. Charles Henry Brent, a former bishop in the American Episcopal Church, wrote: "What is dying? I am, standing on the seashore. A ship sails to the morning breeze and starts for the ocean. She is an object of beauty and I stand watching her

till at last she fades on the horizon and someone at my side says, 'She is gone'. Gone where? Gone from my sight, that is all. Just at the moment when someone at my side says, 'she is gone', there are others who are watching her coming, and other voices take up a glad shout, 'There she comes' and that is dying". How reassuring do you find that thought?

3. In the light of Paul's imagery of life as a race with death as the finishing line, the English Puritans used to describe the day of their death as their 'Coronation Day'. How do you respond to this imagery?
4. What else has struck you in studying this passage?

5. A LIVING HOPE (1 PET 1.3-8)

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!" (1 Pet 1.3). Praise cascades from Peter's lips leaving him no time to breathe – or at least no time to put in a full-stop. In the Greek the ten verses that run from 1.3 – 1.12 are but one sentence. Peter declares that God is to be "praised" (NIV) because of what he has done for us in Jesus. He has given us new life, raised Jesus from the dead, and has reserved an extraordinary inheritance for us. No wonder he is worthy of praise!

In this opening hymn of praise God is defined as "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (v3). Jesus is not declared as the Son of God, but rather God is described as the "Father of our Lord Jesus Christ". It is not that the Son has usurped the place of the Father, but rather it is the Son who makes the Father known. All truly Christian preaching has therefore to begin with Jesus.

Jesus is described as "our Lord Jesus Christ". Is Peter already anticipating the theme of resurrection? For as Peter declared on the Day of Pentecost it was through raising Jesus to life that God "made this Jesus both Lord and Messiah [Christ]" (Acts 2.36). Jesus is Lord precisely because God raised him from the dead (Rom 10.6). Of interest is the possessive pronoun "our". Peter underlines the special bond not only between him and his Lord, but also between the Lord and all those who "love him" (1.8). The Christian religion is a personal religion. Christians do not in the first place believe in a set of doctrines. They believe in the Lord who "loved them and gave himself for them" (see Gal 2.20).

Because of his own personal experience of having let down Jesus, Peter was mindful of God's "great mercy" extended to him (see also 2.10). However, none of us deserve the new beginning that God has given us in Christ. Here is cause for praise.

"He has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead". God in raising Jesus from the dead brought not only new life to his Son, but also to all those who have "faith" (1.5). Although the "hope" of life beyond the grave remains only a hope, God has already transformed the lives of those who believe. Peter uses a simple past (aorist) participle to indicate that God "has caused us to be born again". Within the New Testament this Greek verb is only found here and in 1.23, but is closely related to the Greek expression found in John 3.3,7 where Jesus talked to Nicodemus of the necessity of being "born again" if he was to "see the kingdom of God". 'New birth' is a dramatic metaphor to describe the transformation which takes place when we put our faith in Jesus.

In 1 Pet 1.3 the means God uses to bring about the new birth is "the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead"; whereas in 1 Pet 1.23 the means is "the living and enduring word of God". In reality there is little difference between the two, for "the living and enduring word of God" is the gospel message of resurrection. When the preaching of the message of the resurrection encounters faith in the heart of the hearers, then the radical process of new birth takes place.

Note that faith first and foremost is centred on the risen Lord Jesus and on the life that he offers. Faith looks back to Easter Day and looks forward "in hope" to the coming of the Kingdom of God. It is a "living hope" in the sense that it has been engendered by the resurrection of Jesus and remains focused on the resurrection life that is in Jesus.

It was this "hope" in the resurrection which separated the Christians from their non-Christian neighbours. The non-Christian world was "without hope and without God" (Eph 2.12). Death was dreaded. Sophocles said: "Not to be born at all - that is by far the best fortune; the second best is as soon as one is born with all speed to return thither one has come". In the words of an epitaph on a tomb just off the Appian Way that led to Rome: "The sun will rise and set, but it is eternal darkness for me".

By contrast Christians can face death in the 'sure and certain hope' of resurrection. Peter describes the 'blessings' (GNB) to come as "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading" (1.4). It is "imperishable" for it cannot decay with age: the life God has for us in Christ will never come to an end. It is

"undefiled", for it cannot be spoiled by sin: the life God has for us in Christ is perfection itself. It is "unfading", for it cannot be debased with the passing of time: the life God offers in Christ will never lose its value.

These blessings are "kept for you in heaven". Peter employs a Greek perfect passive participle to indicate a past action with results that continue into the present. The participle can have the sense that this life has been indefinitely reserved for the people of faith. Alternatively, it can mean that this life in heaven will remain immune from disaster (see Matt 6.19-20; Lk 12.33).

This resurrection hope belongs to men and women of faith who "are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1.5: see also 1.20; 4.7). Peter employs a military term to describe the security of Christian believers, and in so doing uses a present participle. The implication is that God's power remains in constant guard over those who put their trust in the God of resurrection. The power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead is the power that ensures the safety of those who have been born again.

"In this you rejoice" (1.6). The present experience of God's resurrection power in the lives of those who have faith as also the hope of resurrection to come are the cause ("in this") for great rejoicing, in spite of present "trials" (1.6). Future joy outweighs the present suffering. Joy was the mood of Easter (e.g. John 20.20). Joy too was the hallmark of the early church (Acts 2.46: also 4.16; 5.41; 16.34). The Greek verb used here and in 1.8 is found in the Magnificat, where Mary cries out, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour (Lk

1.46,47). Although the underlying Greek could be an imperative ("Rejoice!"), almost certainly we have here the indicative. Those to whom Peter was writing did not have to be told to be joyful, they already "greatly" rejoiced (NIV).

Peter was able to take a positive view even of their present "trials" (1.6). They have come "so that your faith...tested by fire... may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1.7). For Peter even the darkest of clouds can have a silver - or rather a golden - lining. The picture is of God refining faith as a goldsmith might refine gold - the end product is so much better, it is now free of impurity (see Ps 66.10; Prov 17.3; 27.21; Zech 13.9; Mal 3.3). Faith is "more precious than gold" because one day even gold will perish (see also 1.18). No wonder Peter and his fellow believers rejoiced!

Peter elaborates on this joy, which has its roots in a love for the risen Lord Jesus, unseen and yet present by his Spirit. "Although 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 indescribable and glorious joy" (1.8). Unlike Peter, the Christians to whom he wrote had never had the privilege of physically seeing Jesus, yet they had come to "love him". Here is a reminder that the Christian faith is primarily a relationship and not a philosophy or a moral code. Until the day when they will indeed see him 'face to face' (1 Cor 13.12), they "now" are called to "believe" in him. Peter was probably alluding to the words of the Risen Lord Jesus after Thomas' encounter with him: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (John 20.29). As a result of their relationship with the risen Lord Jesus and the hope that is

theirs in him, they “exult with a joy which is beyond description and which is shot through with that glory which belongs to God himself” (1.8). It is “too great for words” (REB); it is “inexpressible” (NIV & ESV).

This joy is deepened because as a result of their faith in the risen Lord Jesus, they are "receiving... the salvation" of their "souls" (1.9). Peter employs a present participle: their future salvation is already in the process of being worked out in the present. Already they have been born again - however, their "hope" of sharing in the resurrection of Jesus has yet to be realised. The "salvation of your souls" is the nearest to which Peter comes to Paul's doctrine of the resurrection of the body. The soul for Peter has the Semitic sense of the essential self and refers to humans as "living beings" (see Gen 2.7). What a wonderful hope!

Questions for discussion

1. God's new life can be experienced already in the here and now: God “has given us new birth into a living hope” (1.3). What for you is the essence of this new life? I love the description of this “brand new life” (The Message) given by American scholar Joel Green: “personal reconstruction within a new web of relationships, resocialization within the new community and the embodiment of a new life-world evidenced in altered dispositions and attitudes”.
2. Peter emphasises the certainty of “the living hope” (1.3) that is ours. How would you explain the certainty of the Christian hope? Would it be true to say that for most people “hope” is something they or others will do, in the Bible hope it something we have and is “kept in heaven” for us (1.4)?

3. As we have seen Peter begins his letter on a cascade of praise. As a result of our faith in Christ, says Peter, we rejoice “with an indescribable joy and glorious joy” (1.8). Then why is church not always the most joyful of experiences?
4. What else has struck you through studying this passage?

6. THE HOPE OF HEAVEN (REV 21.1-7)

One day Saint Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, took a break from his writing about God and took a walk along the beach. He came across a boy scooping sea water into his hands and then pouring the water into a hole he had hollowed out earlier in the sand. Puzzled, Augustine watched as the lad repeated his action again and again and again. Eventually his curiosity got the better of him. ‘What do you think you are doing?’ ‘Oh, I am emptying the ocean into my hole’, said the boy. ‘But’, replied Augustine, ‘the ocean is too large for your hole’. ‘And so too is God too large for your book!’, retorted the boy. John’s visions in the Book of Revelation are all about God. God is not just one item in the New Jerusalem, rather it is God who creates the New Jerusalem. It is God who wipes away the tears. It is God who makes “everything new” (21.5 NIV).

In God’s new world everything will be radically “new”. There will be "a new heaven and a new earth" (21.1), and a "new Jerusalem" (21.2). God will make “all things new” (21.5). The 'newness' of this new world is indicated by the adjective John employs, for it denotes not just that everything will be ‘brand new’, but something "unknown, strange, and remarkable". Life

will be radically different and radically better.

The starting point for John's description of "a new heaven and a new earth" (v1) is found in Isaiah 65, where the prophet looks to the day when children do not die, when old people live in dignity, when those who build houses live in them, and when those who plant vineyards eat their fruit. The vision begins with God saying: "I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind" (Isaiah 65.17,18). However, whereas Isaiah 65 has in view a transformation of the present order, John envisages the creation of a completely new world, in which the distinction between heaven and earth is abolished: for heaven comes down to earth.

In this new earth "the sea is no more" (21.1). To an Englishman accustomed to his island home, the lack of a seaside might appear to be a positive disadvantage! But for John in exile on the island of Patmos, the sea symbolised separation from friends and loved ones. The disappearance of the sea represented the coming of freedom and the end of oppression.

However, there is another and more important thought present. The sea for John and his readers was a seething cauldron of evil. The sea in Ancient Near Eastern mythologies and also in Jewish was a symbol of evil. Indeed, the rabbis likened hell to the sea. In Revelation the sea is the place where the dragon goes when he is cast down from heaven (12.8); and it is from the sea that the Antichrist beast rises (13.1). The absence of the sea in the new world that is coming represents the abolition of evil. The devil has been thrown into the "lake of fire and sulphur" (20.10), as also death and Hades (20.14) and all those guilty of sin in its

many multifaceted forms (21.8). God's new city is "holy" (21.2). "Nothing unclean will ever enter it" (21.27). This is a wonderfully encouraging thought: one day sin and evil will be no more.

This Holy City is named "the new Jerusalem" (21.2). Ever since Jerusalem was destroyed in the sixth century B.C., Jews had dreamed of a new Jerusalem. These dreams continued after the physical rebuilding of Jerusalem and surfaced even more vigorously after the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. In the New Testament the idea of a heavenly Jerusalem is found in Gal 4.26 and Heb 12.22. In the letter of the Risen Christ to Philadelphia those who remain faithful are to be inscribed with "the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, that comes down from my God out of heaven" (3.12).

John sees the new Jerusalem "coming down out of heaven from God" (21.2: also 21.10). What to us might appear as an element out of a science-fiction film, is a theological statement. The descent of the new Jerusalem "out of heaven from God" points to this new world being of God's making and is not the product of human effort. "I am making all things new" declares the one who is seated on the throne (21.5). The kingdom of this world becomes "the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah" on the day when God takes up his rule and reigns" (11.15-18).

The new Jerusalem is pictured "as a bride" (21.2). This image has its roots in the Old Testament (Isaiah 54.8; 61.10) and is taken up by Jesus (John 3.29,30: also Matt 9.15; 25.1-13) and developed by Paul (2 Cor 11.2; Eph 5.29-30). John has already described the coming of God's reign as being the moment of the wedding of the Lamb, for which "his bride has made herself ready" (19.7: see

also 21.9; 22.17). The picture of a bride coming to meet her husband conveys the idea of joy and festivity, union and of fulfilment. Like a bride on her wedding day, she is "adorned for her husband" (21.2), "beautifully dressed" (NIV).

The new Jerusalem becomes God's new home. A voice declares: "See the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples and God himself will be with them God" (21.3) The new Jerusalem is characterised by the presence of God. In the words with which Ezekiel closes his great vision of the restored Jerusalem: "The Lord is There" (Ezek 48.35). John alludes to the promise given to the people of God as they wandered in the wilderness: "I will place my dwelling in your midst, and I shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people" (Lev 26.11,12). "God's dwelling place is now among the people" (NIV).

John modifies that Old Testament prophecy in one important respect. This, however, is not clear in most English translations which speak of "his people" in the singular (21.3): the best Greek texts read "peoples" in the plural (so the NRSV). The new Jerusalem will have a diverse multi-racial population, with representatives "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (7.9). Heaven is a place of radical inclusivity.

The voice from heaven continues: "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more" (21.4). The Old Testament is not quoted literally, but there is a reference to Isaiah 25.8; 35.10 and 65.19. Death and suffering will have no place, for they belong to the old order dominated by sin and evil. Interestingly, the new order of things

is depicted primarily in terms of what it replaces. In describing the indescribable it is easier to speak of what will not be, rather than what will be, for "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2.9; Isaiah 64.3).

God declares, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end" (21.6). He is the beginning and the end of history, and Lord of all that is in-between. Nothing is outside his jurisdiction.

God then issues an invitation: "To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life" (21.6). In the Middle East with its desert wastes water is a symbol of ultimate satisfaction. Had John been writing from Atlanta, Georgia, he might have drawn upon the imagery of ice-cold Coca Cola.: "the water of life" is 'the real thing'!

Questions for discussion

1. Many people today dream of escaping the city, whereas John describes heaven as a mega-city. How do you respond to this urban imagery of heaven?
2. To describe the church as "a bride adorned for her husband" is a long way removed from the present reality of church today. At best the church is like Cinderella among the ashes. What has got to change?
3. John's vision of heaven is dominated by God. There is no mention of being re-united with loved ones. How do you feel about this omission?
4. What else has struck you through studying this passage?