

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,⁴ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you,⁵ 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.⁶ In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.⁷ 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.⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy,⁹ for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:3-9)

Give Thanks for the Goal of Your Faith

Here in the United States, we have traditional stories about the pilgrims and the first Thanksgiving. When I was growing up, you heard those stories in school and even saw them on TV. Kids did Thanksgiving art projects in school. So I asked the teachers in our school if kids still do that. They told me that in the younger grades they do, but not in the older ones. And they kind of laughed and told me that the kids were pretty confused about the details, so they thought they should cover them. In truth, people in general have a lot of historically inaccurate ideas about the pilgrims and the first Thanksgiving. To tell it in broad strokes, in September of 1620, the *Mayflower* left England with 102 passengers who wanted to start a new life in the New World. They had a horrible crossing and arrived in New England just in time for a bitter winter to set in. They actually lived on board ship through that winter – and almost half of them died. In April, the *Mayflower* left the survivors on shore and went back to England. The pilgrims had to survive until their first harvest came in four or five months later. It was a horribly difficult time but they were helped by local Indians. When that first harvest came in, they had a feast, probably sometime in October. They invited the Indians who had done so much to help them and the first Thanksgiving was celebrated.

It was an iconic moment in colonial history. Unfortunately, relations between the Indians and the settlers in Massachusetts deteriorated until a series of wars drove those Indians out. But at that moment, the pilgrims were truly thankful. Have you ever considered why? It was because they had survived all those horrors. So many people died – especially among the women and children – that every single colonist had to have been scarred. They rejoiced because they had lived. And they gave thanks because they were Christian people who knew who had brought them through those difficult months. Their lives were a good illustration of the point St. Peter was making in our lesson for this evening: this life is not the end all and be all of our existence. It’s only temporary. And every blessing and every hardship that we face here is designed by God to get us to the next life. So today, as we prepare to celebrate this American tradition of giving thanks for all that we have here, let’s remember the goal of all those blessing from God. **Give thanks for the goal of your faith.**

I.

It is the cause of joy in our suffering. Peter was talking to people like us, people who did not know Jesus personally, people who had heard the gospel and come to faith. He says, **“Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”** There are so many people in the Bible who knew Jesus personally or who had visions of God or angels, it’s nice to see people who actually share our experience and all the challenges that we face as believers.

Notice what Peter said about them: they had never met Jesus, but they loved him. And even though they still couldn’t see him with their physical eyes, they trusted in him and rejoiced in him. That was true, even though they were suffering grief in all kinds of trials. Now, Peter didn’t say that the trials weren’t real or that they didn’t hurt. He didn’t say that rejoicing in Jesus made the pain go away. He didn’t say that they were glad to face those things. He said that even in all the grief, the joy was still there. Is it possible to rejoice and grieve at the same time? I suppose that depends on what you think joy is. I don’t really think it’s possible to be happy and sad at the same time, at least not under ordinary circumstances. But it is possible to be glad about something, even when you hurt. If you had to go in for some relatively routine surgery – say a hernia – and the

doctor found a much more serious problem that needed to be addressed right away, at first, you might be scared and upset. But what if the doctor then told you, “It’s a good thing we found this now. It’s treatable now. But if this had gone on for a while, it would’ve been so much worse.” You might have a totally different reaction. Even as you went through the pain of recovering from that first surgery and the difficulty of the treatments you needed, you would still be glad the doctors found the problem and that you had a good prognosis.

Life is like that sometimes. It hurts here. We long for Jesus to return. We know that all the pains and sorrows of this life only end when our Lord comes back. But his promise that he will return and heal all those hurts gives us hope and even joy. It gives us the strength to face the pain that life inflicts on us. But Peter says the goal of our faith is the salvation of our souls. Being a Christian simply does not promise us life without pain here. Being a Christian is not about painting smiles on our faces and acting like nothing hurts. While being positive because we trust our Lord is a good thing, the goal of our faith is the salvation of our souls – not our bodies, our souls. Getting to heaven is the best we can manage here. That won’t change until Jesus comes back and remakes this world. But knowing that Jesus is coming, knowing relief and true happiness are coming, gives us joy here. We’re glad to know his love. We look forward to living with him forever.

II.

In the end, that’s what faith is, right? Peter calls that “a living hope.” When he says that, he doesn’t mean, “I hope so,” the way we often do. “I hope it doesn’t snow on Sunday when everybody’s driving back home.” I do hope that, but I’m not all that confident about it. That will be December 1st after all! Our living hope is knowing that God has plans for us. There’s no question – those plans are real. We just can’t see them yet. But that hope gives us eternal life. So in that sense, faith and hope are really two sides of the same coin. St. Peter focuses on the importance of that coin tonight. He explains the role that suffering plays in that hope and faith. On this Thanksgiving, **give thanks for the goal of your faith. Even though it is the cause of suffering under God’s direction.**

Peter says something that’s a little hard to wrap our heads around. He talks about grief and suffering and says, **“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.”** Suffering isn’t just some random act that happens to us. God controls and limits suffering. He only allows those things to touch us which further his plan. What is his plan? To refine our faith because our faith gets us to eternal life. In that sense, faith is the most valuable thing we have. It’s certainly more valuable than any treasure of this life. Nothing that we own here will be ours when we die. Nothing that we leave to our heirs will survive the final judgment. But faith carries us home to eternity.

Peter speaks of suffering proving that our faith is genuine. He compares that faith to gold which is refined in the fire. In a number of places, God uses the picture of refining gold for suffering. When you refine gold, you heat it up until the fire burns the impurities out of it. In the same way, suffering burns the impurities out of our faith. I don’t think it’s an accident that God uses that picture of fire. Fire hurts. Being stuck in the fire and being refined isn’t supposed to sound like fun. But passing through that fire has a permanent spiritual effect on us. It burns out the distractions and all the earthly things that we normally want to trust in. And it proves our faith. It demonstrates to us first of all that our faith is real because that faith hangs on to Jesus in all the fire and suffering.

Now, if you think about it, that means that you don’t really get the benefit while the suffering is going on. Imagine those pilgrims living on that filthy, stinking ship through the winter 1620 and 21. All but five of the women on board died. Many of the children died. It was cold and crowded and miserable. And most of those people were believers. But I doubt they said to themselves, “Isn’t it nice that God loves us enough to put us through this so that our faith grows?” I imagine they huddled together to stay warm and held each other as they mourned another person’s passing. I imagine they wept until they didn’t have any more tears. And they must have prayed, day and night, for God to deliver them. And day after day, week after week, it went on. And as soon as the weather got a little better, the captain kicked them off the ship and sailed for home. And they were stuck without shelter, with no where near enough food to survive until the harvest, and no idea how to carve a life out of the wilderness. It had to be scary. It had to hurt. Even when those Indians helped them, there were long months of hunger and exposure until they finally reached that first harvest.

And then they gave thanks. Then they rejoiced because God was so good to them. Did they forget how much it hurt to get there? No. But God refined their faith in the fire. They clung to all the promises God

makes and rejoiced. How could they do that? The same way we can. By remembering who makes these promises: God the Father who loved us so much that he sent his one and only Son to die for us. The Holy Spirit who works through the gospel and lifts up our hearts. And Jesus. Jesus the Son of God who left heaven itself to live a life that was every bit as hard as ours and then who died the worst death imaginable, as he hung on that cross and his Father abandoned him. Jesus, the Son of God who conquered death itself, who has all power to defeat all that sin does. That's who loves us and promises that all things will work for our good. That's who rules all things and makes them serve our eternal good. That's who works in our hearts when those hurts come and he keeps our faith alive.

Thanksgiving is about all the good things that God gives us. We rightly take a day to thank God for the gifts he gives us here – for home and family, for food and clothing and cars and houses, for a standard of living that is the envy of the entire world, for friends and good government and support when we need it. But we Christians also thank God for the greatest gifts of all: for forgiveness of sin through Jesus, for the promise of eternal life, for the faith that clings to that promise and for the hope that never dies, for the love of God that uses even the worst things we face here to keep us on the road to heaven. You know that this year, these holidays will be the hardest holidays my family has ever faced, so you know that I understand that God does not promise that we will always be happy here. But he does promise that we will always have a reason to rejoice. Rejoice that God loves you even when your life hurts. Rejoice that a new and better world is coming, Rejoice that you will know paradise in God's good time. Amen.