

Three Gifts from the Father

1 Peter 1:3-5

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So it's been a couple of weeks since Christmas. Are you still enjoying the gifts that you received? Indeed, many of us are, but we recognize how quickly our hearts grow bored, even with good gifts. They become normal to us. We are grateful for them, but it's easy to move away from the initial excitement, the surprise, and to begin looking for the next gift, or wondering, "Is this what I really wanted? What if I had asked for this? Or that?" We love the idea of gifts. We love receiving them, and we love giving them. But we also recognize that as human beings, our hearts are fickle, and we quickly move on to something new. But we were in need of a great gift. But sometimes the gift we think we want is not the gift we need. And oftentimes, it is the gift that we didn't think we even wanted or even thought we needed that begins to be the thing that, over time, becomes so incredibly valuable. And then when you reflect on it, and you reflect on the Giver, you then begin to see the design of the Giver. And then you begin to look at the gift in whole new ways, even though in a world of gifts it pales in comparison.

This happened to me at my graduation from high school. They were dear friends of the family, the Bowmans. The Bowmans were an important fixture in my life. My mother worked with the Bowmans. They owned a store that sold southern gifts, much like Southern Living. You could find things in this store to decorate your home. Very good friends. And I remember that telephone number. That telephone number would become very important to me, because when I was hit by an automobile in the middle of town in 1988, and when the paramedics arrived, they asked me about my family. And the only number I remember was that number. And Janice Bowman drove straight to the accident scene a mile away, and she was there until my parents arrived.

And upon my graduation from high school, among the gifts of money and other fun, blingy things that most high schoolers would enjoy receiving for graduation, the Bowmans—in a box nicely wrapped—gave me something I did not want or thought that I needed. It was a pair of really long, very orange jumper cables. I confess, I feigned excitement. "Oh, thank you so much." I can't begin to tell you how many times I use those jumper cables over and over again—in downtown Chicago, in the middle of New England, New Hampshire, in the deep southern states—almost in every state east of the Mississippi, I'm glad that I had those jumper cables in the trunk of my very old car. But, over time, those jumper cables became very precious to me, because I realized that they loved me so much they were thinking about my need before I even knew I needed it.

You see, that's exactly the kind of thing our Father does. Our Heavenly Father gives us gifts that we weren't even asking for, that we didn't know that we needed, and yet it shows us the design of the Father. He is a Father of love, of great mercy, and great gifts. Hear now the Word of God. 1 Peter 1:3-5.

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.

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together.

Now, Lord, we pray, open the eyes of our hearts. Open our minds to the powerful work of the Holy Spirit to be able to receive—perhaps even for the first time—the gifts of the Father. And for those who have already received this gift, may you renew in us the glory of this gift, that it points us to the One who gives it, our Heavenly Father. And help the teacher. In Jesus' name. Amen.

So in these few verses, you'll see in your outline it's very clear of what the Lord is giving: salvation, hope, inheritance. Salvation, hope, and inheritance. So together, let's begin, then, with this first gift, as Peter writes of it. As he praises the Father he says, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!" Now you'll remember last week, that we looked at the triune nature of the work of God's providential gift of salvation. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all working together to bring about the salvation of God's people. Here, now, he returns to that triune nature as he points again, now, first to the Father as he says, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth." Well, that new birth is another way of saying this gift of salvation. Salvation is understood, biblically speaking, as, indeed, new birth. But there are two aspects to this which the Scriptures point us to which this passage would point us to.

The first, we hear it in the word *mercy*. "In his great mercy he has given us new birth." Well, in this mercy, what is he referring to? It is salvation from something. Well, what is it salvation from? It is two things. First, it is salvation from the wrath of God that is poured out on sin. Now, here, I don't want you to hear the word *sin* by simply thinking about actions or behavior. That is not what is pointed to here. What is meant here is something far deeper and something far more catastrophic. Because salvation is not a behavior modification plan. It is salvation from God's wrath that is poured out on sin and its stain on the human nature—salvation from the wrath of God. It is also salvation from eternal separation from the Father because of that wrath that must be poured out on sin itself.

So the mercy that is being pointed to here is that God, in his gift of salvation and new birth and mercy, does not give us what our sin deserves—that is, his wrath. God, in his mercy, gives us new birth. That means something must be done about the stain of sin. And perhaps you do not believe, or perhaps you're doubting about this whole idea of stain and sin. Hear it not from my lips. Hear it from the lips of one of the most celebrating writers of the past hundred years, American writer Philip Roth, where, in his book, *The Human Stain*, he writes these words:

It's there. It's in everyone. Indwelling. Inherent. Defining. The stain that is there before its mark. Without the sign it is there. The stain so intrinsic it doesn't require a mark. The stain that precedes disobedience, that encompasses disobedience and perplexes all explanation and understanding.

As we live in the world, we leave a stained trail. There is no other way to be here. Roth, however, did not believe this had anything to do with grace or redemption or salvation. It merely was a matter that evil is a stain in human beings that precedes, as he says, disobedience. It precedes the mark. By *the mark*, he means the wounds of evil. So there is this stain that is in our very nature. But for Roth, that simply is the way life is, and so what we ought to do is to shape our lives around avoiding all evil and suffering and trial and evil people—to bear up under it in this life. But for Peter, he points us to the One who recognizes and who calls out well before Roth ever did the very same reality that the mercy of God does not give what the stain of our sin deserves. But the answer isn't just "bear up under its reality," for there is a way out, and that way out is through the salvation of Christ Jesus, through the mercy of God that brings about new birth.

New birth precedes new actions. So often times, Christianity is confused that somehow what new birth is, or new life is, or what salvation is, is first and foremost a new way of living. It is a new way of action. It is a new way of decision-making and behavior. But it doesn't start there. It starts where the stain is: in our very nature. And so, instead of being human-doings, we must become new human-beings. And that happens through the new birth that comes through receiving and rejoicing in the salvation of God's mercy in Jesus Christ. That means each and every one of us is either alive yet dead spiritually, or we are alive and we've received new birth through Jesus Christ. If you walk out of this room today and have not received and believed in and received the gift of salvation, then you are a dead person walking. You have physical life, but spiritually you are dead. The stain is still there, and no amount of behavior modification will ever remove that stain. Because—Roth knew it—it precedes behavior.

This is what the Lord wanted to give, because our Father is full of mercy, and he knows what we need is a new life, a new nature—that is, new birth. He means to make us new. And by that new, we increasingly become beautiful. Stains are ugly, are they not? Maybe you have a thing for stains that you like, but the last time I checked, I haven't found a stain that I really thought, "You know? I think I'll keep that." We want the stain removed. Stains are ugly. But the work of salvation, the work of grace, the work of mercy, is to remove it.

I've repeated it here again and again, and I will continue to do so again and again—one of my favorite songs ever by U2 is the song "Grace." And it's looking at the idea and the reality of grace, and singing about it, and personifying it as a woman when they write:

Grace
She takes the blame
She covers the shame
Removes the stain

Grace
She carries a world on her hips
No champagne flute for her lips
No twirls or skips
Between her fingertips

She carries a pearl
In perfect condition
What once was hers
What once was friction
What left a mark
No longer stains

Because grace makes beauty
Out of ugly things
Grace finds beauty
In everything
Grace finds goodness
In everything

God's mercy and grace seek us out to make us beautiful by removing the stain and giving us new life.

He then says, so we have been given this great gift of mercy that he has given to us, new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. This idea of hope. Now, what's interesting about this is that it does come squarely against our whole experience of the idea of hope. Because, generally speaking, the way we think of hope as westerners is something that is inherently uncertain, something that is out into the future. And so we wish for it. We bank on it. We try to work our way towards it, to make it happen. We hope it will happen.

In fact, we just finished a whole week of celebration of hope at winning the largest lottery ever. I bought one ticket. Full confession, right? Not that it was a sin, but I was just letting you know that I did that. Partly, I wanted to do it as a sermon illustration. And I know somebody had to win, right? No, I mean—okay. So as I'm standing in line, I'm in line, and I'm the only person buying one ticket. Most people are buying thirty and forty and fifty dollars. And it's interesting to watch the conversation abuzz inside the local gas station, because people are using the language of hope. They're asking each other, "What would you do with it?" "Well, I hope this is what will happen." "This is what I would do." People putting on social networks all the things they were looking up just in case. How much does a helicopter cost?

How much does a private island in the Caribbean cost? And they were putting up their search histories. True story. With the date stamps, you know?

And there's something that happens when you participate. It's almost impossible not to think, "What would you do if you won?" We are participating in the whole—if you've ever thought that, whether you bought a ticket or not, as a sermon illustration, of course—if you bought a ticket or not, it's next to impossible to imagine what you would do—not to imagine what you would do with it had you won it. It's because we are people of hope. It's inescapable to think about. We look at our own circumstances, and we imagine, "What if?" But we spend so much time thinking about what-if, that becomes our mere definition of hope. We've reduced it to only what-if.

But the whole biblical understanding of hope is not what-if. It is what will be, because of what has already happened. It is a hope not of wishful thinking or gambling our hearts, but rather, it is a certainty of trust based on prior events. And this is the gift of resurrection. This is the gift of hope. Because he says, "You've been given a living hope." Not a gambling hope, not a what-if hope, but a certain hope—a living, breathing, right-now hope, because of what? As he says, "Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." For Peter, he's staking his claim for the rest of his letter.

How we live as those who follow Jesus Christ is not based on what might be or what will be as an uncertainty—but rather, living our lives now because we've been given a living hope, a certainty of what will be, because Christ has been raised from the dead. Peter could not have believed it, but Peter witnessed it. We have not seen it. We are hearing it through Peter's words. And he's testifying. And we at least need to give him the benefit of the doubt, that Christian hope isn't a crutch that says, "Well, maybe life in heaven will be better," or, "I'm so tired now, the only way I can make it through today is what will be." And there is an element of that.

But what Peter is saying—a living hope is not a living hope for the future; it is a living hope right now, because Christ has already been raised from the dead. Therefore, everything we do and how we live and how we breathe is dependent on the certainty of what God has done in the past through raising Christ from the dead. That means this life is a life lived newly in his mercy through his salvation through the resurrection power of Christ. Therefore, I look at the situation and my circumstances, their difficulty and their uncertainty, and I say, "I cannot control them, and neither do I need to let them control me. I can't remove them. I can't escape it. But one thing I know—that Christ has been raised from the dead." That means that the end of the story is life. The end of the story is victory. The end of the story is that the Lord will make all things new, because he's already begun it through Christ in me and in you.

Salvation, hope, and inheritance. When he says:

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.

So he talks about this inheritance, and he uses three adjectives as he does. And he's explaining the nature of this inheritance. He says, simply, it's imperishable, it is unspoiled, and it is unfading. It is eternal in nature. It does not rust. It does not have holes. It is not fragile. It is not conquerable. It is what it is. It is simply a gift that the Father gives that is with him. And because the gift reflects who he is, then that gift is untouchable by all the things that so often bring us fear and anxiety—things that are so easily spoiled, and that perish, and that fade.

And because of time, I want to move this morning to the second part of that third point. He describes the nature of this inheritance as being imperishable, unspoiled, and unfading. But what is the gift? What is the inheritance? Because he says here we've been given "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.” And then he says, “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.”

So what is this inheritance that we're being brought into? Is it simply enjoying the environment of heaven and, when Christ returns, the new heavens and the new earth? Well, it could be that. Certainly it's not less than that. Could it be that the inheritance is eternal life itself? Well, it could be. It's certainly not less than that. But I believe what Peter is referring to here as the inheritance to which we are being brought into, that will then be revealed through the salvation at the coming of our Lord, is the very thing that our Savior prayed. The inheritance is God himself. The inheritance isn't the gifts of God alone; the inheritance is God himself.

Listen to Jesus's prayer that is referred to in John 17. He says:

Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began. [John 17:3-4]

And then he continues when he says, “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.” [John 17:15-16] So what Jesus is praying for is that we would receive the inheritance of God himself, of knowing him. That means salvation, eternal life, are not the benefits or consequences merely of what Christ has done for us, the reception of forgiveness, the receiving of mercy and grace, and the stain being removed—it is that. It isn't just that we receive the consequences and strength and faith to live a new life as followers of Christ—it is that. But it is this.

What did Jesus long for most? To be reunited with the Father at his right hand. I long for my Father. This is the kind of thing that Jesus prayed, and he prays it for us. That means that when Peter says, “You are being brought into an inheritance,” it means this—that we were meant to be reunited with our Heavenly Father. And that Heavenly Father means to bring about salvation by his mercy through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, equipping us with a living hope, that we would be preserved for an inheritance that is a relationship undefiled, unspoiled, and unfading, as new creation, with the One who created us, living with joy in all eternity.

Do you long for this? I believe you do. And maybe, perhaps you don't even know that you do. We long to be reunited with the Father. Earnest Hemingway wrote about this very idea in his short story called “The Capital of the World.” He said:

Madrid is full of boys named Paco, which is the diminutive of the name Francisco, and there is a Madrid joke about a father who came to Madrid and inserted an advertisement in the personal columns of *El Liberal* which said: PACO MEET ME AT HOTEL MONTANA NOON TUESDAY ALL IS FORGIVEN PAPA and how a squadron of Guardia Civil had to be called out to disperse the eight hundred young men who answered the advertisement.

The reason it's meant to be a joke on the ubiquity of the name Paco in Madrid, but the reason why it works, is because of this—there were a lot of boys named Paco who wanted to be reunited with their father, who wanted it all to be forgiven. Forgiveness, yes, is what they wanted. But the reason why they came was to be with their father.

We celebrate the Supper because it is a screaming—please do not take this tritely—it is a screaming advertisement to the world and to you as a note from our Father through his Son Jesus Christ on the night in which he was betrayed. And he says to you, “All is forgiven. Meet me at the table.” For when we eat of this bread and we drink of this cup, what we receive is more than forgiveness, it's more than the removal of the stain, but a celebration of a supper with the Father, who has given us a living hope, and who, through his Son, will return again, that we will enter into an inheritance that will never

spill, never fade, never, ever, ever go away. Because that is the gift of the Father; it is himself. Let us prepare our hearts to celebrate the gift of the Father through the gift of the Son, that we would long for him. Let's pray.

Now, Heavenly Father, feed us and satisfy our thirst. For what we need, O Lord, is new life. What we need, O Lord—yes, we need the removal of the stain. We need the forgiveness and your mercy and grace. But, O Lord, what Christ came to do was to reunite us with you—and is you. Now, O Lord, by faith, trusting in the work of Christ, enable us to rejoice and to celebrate the Supper as an invitation from the Father through the Son to enjoy this great grace. In Jesus' name. Amen.