Our Christian Heritage

SPEAKER	Wes Neely
DATE	Sunday, April 16, 2023
PASSAGES	1 Peter 1; 1 Peter 3; 1 Peter 4; John 15; James 1; Matthew 16
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:21:28 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

What Christians inherit is not an easier life. It is a living hope — born again through a resurrection that has already happened to someone who went ahead of us. That hope does not cancel suffering; it dates it. And it is meant to be carried in a body of people, not alone.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Our hope is not blind trust in a promise. Christ was raised first, and what he did for himself he has promised to do for us. He did not ask us to jump before he jumped.
- Peter writes to "elect exiles" scattered across provinces — which means this letter is addressed to Christians as such, and lands on us directly without any cultural translation.
- Scripture is written *for* us, but not always *to* us. Knowing which is which is ordinary, necessary work for anyone reading the Bible honestly.
- The health-and-wealth account of the Christian life is not too generous. It is too small — a narrow, incomplete picture of an inheritance that outruns any comfort it promises.
- There are two kinds of suffering: the kind everyone on earth gets, and the kind that comes specifically from living like Jesus. No one escapes the first.
- There is no suffering Olympics. People are not at the limit of your threshold; they are at the limit of theirs.
- "It's only for a little while" is true, and it is the wrong thing to say to someone in the middle of it. Meditate on it *before* you need it.

- Asking for help is not a burden you impose. It is an opportunity you hand someone to love the way Christ loved them.

▶ 1:21:28

Wes Neely opened by saying, for the first time from that platform, that he serves as assistant pastor at Hope Chapel. The church was paused in its study of Corinthians for the Easter season, so Matt had simply told him to preach on what he thought he needed to preach about. He read through 1 Peter 1, had strong feelings about it, and concluded it fit — partly because of the week the congregation was having. Minutes earlier the room had broken into small clusters to pray for Evan Hands, a young man from the church hit by a car two days before.

Hemingway's version of the world

▶ 1:25:05

He began with a line that had been ringing in his head for weeks, from *A Farewell to Arms*: "The world breaks everyone, and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break, it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these, you can be sure it will kill you too, but there will be no special hurry."

Wes is fond of Hemingway as a writer — the man knew how to say what he wanted to say — and entirely unpersuaded by his conclusion, which is that the suffering is guaranteed and the meaning is not. Hope Chapel's Good Friday service had put the same raw material in front of the congregation two days before: people from the body standing up and describing, without polish, the worst things that had happened to them. Same facts. A completely different ending.

Written for us — and this time, to us

▶ 1:27:13

He read the greeting — 1 Peter 1:1–2, to the elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia — and then took a short detour that was worth the time. A good reader of the Bible has to keep asking whether a passage is being written *at* them or at someone in the text. God told Isaiah to do things nobody imagines are instructions for us. Paul addressed problems belonging to one specific church. "The Bible is written for us, but not always necessarily directly to us," Wes said — a line he has borrowed and kept.

Which is why Peter's address matters. He is not writing to one congregation with one problem. He names a scattering of provinces and calls the readers exiles, and that puts the letter's weight directly on anyone who belongs to Christ. No cultural gymnastics required.

A living hope, and the man who jumped first

▶ 1:29:57

> "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."
>
> 1 PETER 1:3–5 ↗

▶ 1:31:25

Two things follow from that mercy: we are born again, and we are given a hope that is alive because Christ is. Wes explained the logic with a picture he had first tried out on the middle schoolers. Someone walks up and tells you to run and jump off a cliff. You decline. Maybe with a harness, a bungee cord, and several volunteers going first — maybe. Now suppose that person jumps off the cliff themselves, no ropes, flies back up, settles gently on the ground beside you and says, "Your turn."

"We don't have to just take him on his word," Wes said, "because he has already done that for us." The shortest version of the gospel he could give: Christ died and rose again, and he is going to do that for us — and we know he can, because he did it himself. "It's not a blind faith."

"For a little while"

▶ 1:34:50

The first Christians expected him back soon. Wes pictured them on the porch, squinting at a figure in the distance — is that him? — and it never was. Two thousand years on, it is hard to hold that fire honestly, and no reason to assume it will not be another two thousand. So the practical question becomes what this life is actually for while we wait. Peter answers it next.

> "In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith — more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire — may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ."
>
> 1 PETER 1:6–9 ↗

▶ 1:37:23

"A little while." Wes found the phrase almost funny. Nobody in a trial says, well, at least it's only for a little while — it feels like a pit with no way out. But measured against eternity, sixty to a hundred years is a blip, and "a little while" may even overstate it. His illustration was blunt: if someone asked to slap you in the face, you would say no. For a hundred dollars, probably still no. For a million, "sign me up — slap me as many times as you want." The sting lasts ten seconds and the reward does not. And note what the trial is for: it is a litmus test of the genuineness of faith, not an exam you have to pass to keep your salvation.

What we are not promised

▶ 1:38:47

He did not think Hope Chapel had much of a problem here, but he wanted the idea dead anyway: the notion that following Christ closely enough will buy you health, money and a comfortable life. His objection was not that it promises too much. It is that it promises far too little — "a small, narrow, focused, incomplete picture" of an inheritance that dwarfs any earthly pleasure on the list. And the congregation knew better already; there are people in that room who were tremendously faithful and went through unimaginable things.

He stacked up the texts quickly. John 15:18–19 — if the world hates you, know that it hated me first. 2 Corinthians 12:9–10 — grace sufficient, power made perfect in weakness, so Paul delights in insults and hardships. 1 Peter 3:14–17 — suffer for righteousness' sake and you are blessed; always be ready to give a reason for the hope that is in you, with gentleness and respect. And then Peter, plainly:

> "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed."
>
> 1 PETER 4:12–14 ↗

Two kinds of suffering, and no Olympics

▶ 1:42:55

The first kind is not unique to Christians at all. Evan Hands was not hit by a car because he was a Christian; things happen, and they happen to everyone. “No one escapes this life without trauma, heartache and pain,” Wes said — and if you think you have, either you are blessed beyond anything he could hope for, or you have not thought about it properly, or it simply has not reached you yet.

▶ 1:44:34

The second kind follows from living Christ’s life out loud. The logic is not complicated: God became a man, and the people in charge looked at him and decided to kill him. If a life lived perfectly drew that, a life imitating it should expect something similar. Wes pressed the point from the other side — if every non-Christian you know thinks you are the greatest guy alive, is that not at least worth a second look? The heroes of the faith we read about from past generations ran the same pattern: they lived out God’s calling and were persecuted for it exactly as Christ was.

Then a caution about how we handle other people’s pain. We compare instinctively, and we discount. A middle schooler’s worst week gets waved off — wait until they have a mortgage. Someone back from the mission field points out that our toilets flush, and they are partly right. But there is no suffering Olympics. When a person is suffering, they are at the limit of what *they* can carry, and that is the only measurement that matters in the moment. Wes had his own evidence: the things that crushed him in middle school he would now happily trade for, but at the time “that was the worst thing I had ever known.”

▶ 1:48:00

Which led to a warning worth writing down: a true thing said at the wrong moment is still the wrong thing. Nobody getting bullied at thirteen was ever helped by “hey man, cheer up, life’s gonna get a lot worse — so like it while you’ve got it.” The more spiritual version does no better — “Hey Wes, I know you’re suffering, it’s fine, just realize that when you’re dead you’re going to be in heaven, then everything’s gonna be all right.” It is true; it is what Peter says. “But that is very rarely what I would call sound wisdom when dealing with someone who’s suffering.” The time for that truth is earlier: “if you’re not suffering, meditating on those thoughts could be helpful for when the difficult times truly come.” Build the eternal perspective while you are in a good head space, and it is already load-bearing when you need it.

Abby, the electricity, and the shame of asking

▶ 1:49:29

Good Friday was the reason this topic fit the season. Hearing people in his own congregation describe things he "could not possibly imagine going through," and then hearing that their faith had in many ways been made *stronger* by it, was, he said, "just a testament to the power of Christ working in us." He had asked Abby's permission to use her story — she was not in the room, and he hoped she was watching the livestream — because he wanted the church to do more than be moved by it. He wanted a plan of action.

▶ 1:49:58

She lost her husband. She could not get out of bed — not for the day-to-day tasks, not for sorting through his things, not for the mail. Eventually she missed enough utility payments that the electricity was cut off, and she was sitting in a house she already felt miserable in, now without power or heat. That discomfort was minuscule next to the grief. But it was the moment she knew she had to ask for help.

▶ 1:53:27

Wes thinks the hardest part is not the asking. It is the conviction that you are a burden — if I call my best friend, I will ruin their night. He was careful to say this was not a charge against Hope Chapel or against how the body cared for Abby. But the belief that suffering, or hard seasons, or a struggle with sin is a shameful thing you cannot ask for help with is "a surefire way" of producing a church where everyone has to be Mr. Perfect on Sunday morning and nobody comes when things are bad — which is exactly backwards: a difficult week is the reason to come and be ministered to by the body. His reframe was deliberately self-interested. Asking someone for help hands them an opportunity to do a good work that glorifies Christ — and "any Christian who's worth their salt is going to pounce at that opportunity." We ought to be "racing and fighting each other for the opportunity" to do it.

He put himself under the same rule. Leadership in Christ's hands looked like washing the disciples' feet, which was culturally unthinkable. So if anyone asked Wes for his job description, this is the one he wants: when people are suffering and need the love of Christ, be a servant to them.

Everyone is dealing with something

▶ 1:57:10

Why vulnerability is so hard in a room like that one: "it's really tough for a lot of people to come to a church and be vulnerable because you think everyone else has it all together — and everyone's thinking that all at once, so no one's talking about it. Until you realize that everyone's thinking about it and no one has it together and everyone's dealing with something at some point in their lives."

Then the smallest possible example, offered on himself. His son Silas running around screaming is, he admitted, "as far as trials go, way down the bottom of the list" — if that is his daily worry he is living a blessed life. Parenting is still hard, something he is finding out in real time. But he tries to take even that the way Peter framed it: "this is a small little test of the genuineness of our faith." The verse is not reserved for catastrophes.

What we are promised

▶ 1:58:10

Two things, and he named them carefully. First, Christ lives with us through the Holy Spirit, and he is in the suffering with us. "Christ is there, and Christ suffered on the cross for you. He's suffering with you, no matter what you're going through." That holds even when we feel alone, "even if the church isn't doing a great job and no one's helping us out" — and it is "a grander and greater thing than any amount of money, any amount of prosperity would be able to give you."

Second, he gives us each other. Christ did not teach one man and send him to teach one other man; he taught twelve, they taught more, and more, "until now, two thousand years later, here we are. And that's intentional." So "the Christian life isn't a life of solitude, study and meditation on just Christ and his teachings — in many ways it's cooperative. That's why we meet here on Sundays." We are renewed creatures wearing bodies not yet made new, and in the meantime we get to bless and honor and carry each other. When that is done in spirit and in truth, it is a small picture of what life with Christ will be forever. "The big difference is, there we express that love without any need or obligation of counteracting suffering. That will be gone, that will be done and finished — but the love will still remain."

The inheritance

▶ 2:01:13

He closed by naming what the whole message had been circling. "Our Christian inheritance is an inheritance of hope that can counteract all suffering and all pain that we have — not by completely negating the fact that it happens, because we're going to suffer and it's going to be painful, but with the knowledge that it's just for a short while, and that one day Christ will make all things new and we will be resurrected with him, just as he has done for himself."

So the charge: "let us persevere through these trials. Let's use them as opportunities to test our faith, so that God might see us and be glad about the way we come around each other and hold each other tight to get through difficult times." The inheritance itself is "not of this world" — but, he was careful to add,

"we get pieces of it in anticipation" of a kingdom where there will be no more pain and suffering. He left two passages standing.

> "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."
>
> JAMES 1:2–4 ↗

> "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?"
>
> MATTHEW 16:24–26 ↗

▶ 2:03:05

Then he put the two halves of the message side by side one last time. We have the encouragement that Christ is there suffering with us; we also have the confidence that "no amount of suffering or pain that we experience on this earth is going to compare to the glory that Christ has reserved for us in heaven" — the undefiled inheritance that cannot be broken into or stolen. "So let's take that information and go live our lives with the confidence that God will make all things new, that God has the power to heal any suffering and any brokenness that we have in ourselves."

His prayer afterward held the two halves together without resolving the tension: we cannot escape suffering, but "you came down as man, and anything we're going through, you're going through with us." Then the ask — that the knowledge in our heads would go forth and be manifest in our actions and our deeds, that the world would see it, and that it would be a testament not to our goodness but purely to "the goodness of your Son who died for us." He prayed for strength to help those in need, and for healing on the people in that congregation who had been through so much and were still going through it. Then the benediction — go in peace, love and serve the Lord — and an open invitation: the prayer teams were down front, for anything at all.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- 1 Peter 1:1–2
- 1 Peter 1:3–5
- 1 Peter 1:6–9
- John 15:18–19
- 2 Corinthians 12:9–10
- 1 Peter 3:14–17
- 1 Peter 4:12–14
- John 13:14
- James 1:2–4
- Matthew 16:24–26

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Hemingway said the world breaks everyone and that is the end of the story. Where have you caught yourself living as though he were right?
2. Wes said our hope is not blind because Christ went first. What difference does the “he already did it himself” part make to something you are afraid of right now?
3. Peter calls our trials “a little while.” When has an eternal perspective genuinely helped you, and when has it felt like a line someone handed you too early?
4. Abby had to reach the point of no electricity before she asked for help. What keeps you from asking sooner — and who would you have to tell first?
5. If asking for help hands someone else an opportunity to love like Christ, who are you going to give that opportunity to this week?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Wes Neely serves as assistant pastor at Hope Chapel — a title he said out loud from the platform for the first time in this message. He teaches the middle school ministry, prepares sermons, and handles facilities and campus work days, and he is a parent; his son Silas gets a mention as a small daily test of patience. Matt asked him to preach the Sunday after Easter with no assigned text, and he chose 1 Peter 1. He describes the job he wants as being a servant to people who are suffering.

Watch the full message:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0omIgQPzzUA&t=4888s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.