THE RESURRECTION AS THE SOURCE OF LIVING HOPE
An Exposition of I Peter 1:3

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"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,..."

It is a common saying that "while there's life, there's hope." The reverse of this, however, is even more true — "while there's hope, there is life." For men cannot live meaningfully without hope.

One of the saddest words of the Old Testament was spoken by Ezekiel, when he described Israel as a valley of dry bones, without sinew, flesh, skin, or breath. And why was this figure appropriate? Because, they said, "Our hope is lost; we are clean cut off" (37:11b). "Our hope is lost" — what else could the loss of hope lead to than that described by various translations? "We are completely done for" (Berkeley). "Our web is severed from the loom" (NEB). "We are as good as dead" (Jerusalem Bible). The loss of hope is the negation of life.

One of the profoundest insights of Milton in Paradise Lost is his picture of the Devil when he surrenders hope. Says the Devil:

"So farewell hope, and, with hope,

Farewell remorse! All good to me is lost;
Evil, be thou my Good."1

When hope is lost, good is lost, and evil becomes good! We may exist, but we cannot really live without hope.

But how can we keep hope alive when that on which hope is based seems so uncertain? Our hopes are flimsy, and seldom fulfilled. Men usually die with their hopes unachieved, and all merely human hopes end with death. Archbishop Leighton, of Scotland, wrote in the 17th
century: "Worldly hopes often mock men, and so cause them to be ashamed; . . . they put the fool upon a man; when he hath judged himself sure, and laid so much weight and expectation on them, then they break and foil him; they are not living, but lying hopes, and dying hopes; they die often before us, and we live to bury them, and see our own folly . . . in trusting to them; but at the utmost, they die with us when we die, and can accompany us no further . . . It is a fearful thing when a man and all his hopes die together."

This was vividly illustrated in the ancient world into which the Christian faith was born. Paul could describe the pagans, although there were some exceptions — as those who “[had] no hope” (I Thess. 4:13). One translator renders Paul’s same expression in another passage as those who “had nothing to look forward to” (Eph. 2:12c, Phillips). They had never known “the power of a glad sense of the future.” At best, to them “the future life was something shadowy and formidable; life on earth alone was prized by [them].” Death rubbed out everything.

This is clear from some pagan epitaphs. One reads: "You see me a corpse, passers-by. My . . . name was Apollonis, my native town Apamea, but now in the soil of Nicomedia the thread of destiny spun by the Fates holds me fast to the ground . . . Play, laugh, passer-by, knowing that you too must die."

Another epitaph ridicules whatever pagan hopes Greek mythology had enshrined. The Greeks had pictured a grim being named Aeacus, as one of three judges of the underworld who passed on the character of those who died. In addition to them, there was Charon, a hard-bitten ferryman at the river of death who had to be bribed before crossing. There was also Cerberus, a three-headed dog, with serpents wound about his body, with his mouth dribbling black venom, guarding the gates of the underworld, who could be appeased only by tossing him cakes of flour and honey. To indicate that all such imaginative pictures of the future life were vain, one man put on his tomb:

"Do not pass by this epitaph, wayfarer,
But stop, listen, and learn, then go.
There is no boat in Hades, no ferryman Charon,