

Introduction

You've all participated. I know you have. There's no point in denying it. Whether you've sent them or you've received them, you've participated in the Christmas card industry. I'm not saying it's a bad thing! Dawnae and I have participated, too. I'm just saying Christmas cards aren't always...honest.

There's nothing wrong with sending folk a picture of your family in the woods or frolicking in the snow or maybe the leaves—or maybe one of those cards of your family on the beach, because nothing says “Christmas” like 90° and sunscreen and azure waves in the background. Truthfully, Christmas cards often put on your best face, whether you're wearing color-coordinated outfits or matching pajamas—so long as you're smiling.

These can give a false impression, of course. Where are the cards with dad's socks tossed on the floor *outside* the hamper? Or the pictures of the mom who lays a continuous guilt trip? Or the uncle who turns every holiday meal into a political rant? Christmas cards really show how we want to be seen, don't they?

I recently came across some family Christmas cards that are truthful. This first one says, “Dear Santa, exactly how 'good' are we talking?”—with both kids screaming. The second card shows both sides of the coin: “70% naughty and 30% nice. Does that mean Santa is still coming?” Here's one that is utterly truthful: “This card has zero resemblance to our actual lives”. I love that! Finally, here's one we can all relate to: three kids who are utterly miserable, refusing to smile for the camera. “Nailed it.”

So often we come to Christmas with a Christmas card mentality. It's supposed to be a season of joy, of sappy, sentimental songs on Spotify, a time of Instagram-worthy holiday decor. We see commercials of families without drama and without financial stress that Christmas presents and even travel can bring. Christmas is often, at least functionally, a time of good feelings and great circumstances but the truth is Christmas—I don't mean the holiday, but the actual event known as Christmas—reveals what a hot mess we all are. It reveals how badly we need a rescuer. My wife's favorite preacher wrote a wonderful article several years ago about Christmas. He wrote this:

The first Christmas carol, after all, was a war hymn. Mary of Nazareth sings of God's defeat of his enemies, about how in Christ he had demonstrated his power and “has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate” (Lk. 1:52). There are some villains in mind there. Simeon's song, likewise, speaks of the “fall and rising of many in Israel” and of a sword that would pierce the heart of Mary herself. Even the “light of the Gentiles” he speaks about is in the context of warfare. After all, the light, the Bible tells us, overcomes the darkness (Jn. 1:5), and frees us from the grip of the devil (2 Cor. 4).

Russell Moore, <https://www.russellmoore.com/2016/11/29/problem-holly-jolly-christmas-songs/>

What if Christmas weren't really about you getting a sentimental feeling when you hear voices singing, "Let's be jolly; decks the halls with boughs of holly"? What if Christmas were not at all about rockin' around the Christmas tree but about suffering and pain as well as joy and wonder? What if Christmas weren't about a temporary escape from the pressures of life and more about plunging headlong into spiritual warfare?

Today is our fourteenth Christmas Sunday as a church, which means this is my fourteenth Christmas sermon. I thought it would be helpful for us to look at a *classic* Christmas text—the one in 1 Peter 1.

¹ Pet 1:3 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, ⁴ to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ 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. ⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, ⁹ obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

¹⁰ Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, ¹¹ inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. ¹² It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.

1 Peter 1:3–12

Doxology

Peter begins this letter with a doxology. A doxology is simply a declaration of praise. His doxology is simple and straightforward: blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Everything else in our text is an explanation of this declaration of praise. In fact, in the original language Peter wrote, our text is a single sentence. The main clause is the doxology: blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The rest of the sentence contains numerous subordinate clauses supporting this central claim of praise.

It is significant that Peter begins his letter this way. He's writing to Christians in Asia Minor and they were suffering. They were experiencing persecution for being Christians—often at the hand of their fellow Jews. While Paul's ministry was largely to the Gentiles, Peter's remained largely to Jews. As we'll see later, they were being accused of being bad

Jews, those who abandoned their ancestral faith and practices. This led to suffering in all areas of life.

Peter begins with doxology because doxology is central to the Christian life. Worship is how we endure with joy. New Testament scholar Karen Jobes wrote that doxology is the *basis* for the Christian life so Peter begins by declaring God is blessed. We could translate this as “praised be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”. He is praised because he is worthy of praise. Peter begins here, but he goes on to explain to these Christians who were suffering in all sorts of ways why God is worthy of praise.

It’s one thing to acknowledge God is worthy of praise, as if praising him were merely a duty—a thing you have to do. We praise God in the midst of suffering not because it is our duty to do so but because it is the natural response to his goodness in the midst of our circumstances. God is worthy of praise but we praise him because he continually gives us reason to praise him.

Peter begins outlining the various reasons God is praised. He says in verse 3, according to God’s great mercy he has caused us to be born again. God is the cause of our salvation. God is the cause of our faith and repentance. It is God’s mercy on display when we are born again. For this reason he is worthy of praise.

There’s more to this. Peter is writing to Christians who are *suffering*. He’s not merely saying God caused them to be born again, so it’ll *all work out in the end*, as if he’s offering them a magic pill. He’s writing to them about their current state! God has caused them to be born again to two things. First, he has caused them to be born again to a *living* hope. It’s not a dead hope. Dead hope is just wishful thinking with no real prospect of ever being true. The pagan world in which these Christians lived only offered a dead hope. In Ephesians Paul told the Gentile Christians there that prior to faith in Christ they had been without hope—they had a *dead* hope.

The ancient Greek writer Sophocles wrote 2,500 years ago that it is best to not be born at all. The second best, he said, would be for a person to die at birth. The Roman poet Catullus said that even though the sun rises and sets, when our brief lifetime sets, we face an unending night. This is what Paul was getting at when he told the Thessalonians that when we grieve, we do not grieve as those who have no hope. The hope Christians possess is a *living* hope, for it is through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, Peter says. Christ’s resurrection changes all this, for none of us faces an unending night of sleep and darkness. We face *eternal life*.

The second thing God has caused them to be born again to is an inheritance. An inheritance indicates you belong somewhere. It means you have a familial identity. You’re not alone in the world, for you belong to a family. This inheritance signifies an identity for you. Strangers don’t receive an inheritance.

An inheritance can be stolen, though. If your grandmother leaves you something in her will, that thing, whether a physical object or money or even something permanent like land can be taken from you. Peter says the inheritance God has caused them to be born again to is an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. As one author put it, it is “untouched by death, unstained by evil, unimpaired by time”. In other words, this inheritance is eternal: it cannot be taken from you, for he says it is “kept in heaven” for you.

It is, therefore, out of reach from thieves who would seek to steal it. It cannot be taken from them. It cannot be destroyed or denied or corrupted or damaged in any way. It is an

eternal inheritance given by God himself. He further explains why it is imperishable: they themselves are being guarded through faith. God has caused them to be born again to a living hope and God continues to guard them through faith.

Salvation begins and ends with the Lord! He who began the good work, that is, the one who caused you to be born again, will be faithful to complete that work. He will bring it to completion by guarding you through the faith he instills in you. In verse 5 it is God's power that guards through faith. God is at work in you throughout your life, whatever difficulties come your way. We see here the reason God is blessed, for we have received salvation by his power, according to his great mercy.

He indicates this salvation is ready to be revealed in the last time. That is, we have the present experience of salvation, yet this salvation has not yet come in its fullness. There is still suffering and pain. There is still sin and death. These are conquered, defeated enemies, yet they persist in this life. The hope and the inheritance that is ours in Christ cannot be taken from us, no matter how this life appears to be going, for it's only a matter of time before the fullness of our salvation is here.

In The Midst of Suffering

In verse 6 he writes, "In this you rejoice". In what? In salvation! We rejoice in the promise that the work God began when he caused us to be born again is the same work God continues to do as he, by his power, guards us through faith, so that his work will one day be complete. We rejoice in the hope of the gospel, for while there is suffering and pain in this life, the Lord is right there with us, getting us through, and he will see us all the way through when salvation arrives in its fullness.

We rejoice in the gospel, he says. This rejoicing is not an emotional response. It is a reasoned response to the truth of God in Christ. In Matthew 5 Jesus told his disciples they are blessed when others hate them for the gospel. He tells them,

Mt 5:12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.
Matthew 5:12

He's not telling them when people hate them and call them names and lie about them they should get up and do a happy dance. He's not telling them that when the world is pouring its hatred and rage against Christ by directing it to his followers they should smile and say, "Wow, isn't this wonderful!". Notice Jesus' point: they should rejoice that their reward is in heaven. What reward? The inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, *kept in heaven for you*.

Peter tells them they rejoice in the hope of the gospel, in which God has caused them to be born again, that they would receive a living hope and an undeniable inheritance. Then he offers a significant concession: "though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials". Just as Jesus taught Peter and the others, so Peter tells the Christians in Asia Minor: joy is not dependent on your circumstances!

Peter knows these believers are suffering. They suffer for their faith in Jesus, yet suffering—trials—are part of life. In the midst of sorrow, in the midst of pain, in the

midst of difficulty *they rejoice*. Not every one of them is *currently* suffering. Peter says, “if necessary”. Who determines this? Our lives are in the Lord’s hands. According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again. According to his great mercy, he allows suffering into our lives.

In verse 7 Peter gives a reason for this suffering: so that the tested genuineness of your faith may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. The joy to be found in the midst of suffering doesn’t lessen the suffering. It doesn’t turn suffering into celebration. “Various trials” can mean any source of suffering. The reason we can rejoice in the midst of suffering is our living hope in Christ.

Our rejoicing in the midst of suffering reveals God’s goodness. It reveals his kindness and mercy. When you and I rejoice in suffering we prove the genuineness of our faith. That might sound like it’s putting pressure on us, as if we have to force ourselves to rejoice when things are terrible in our lives so that we prove we have faith, but remember what Peter said in the beginning of our text! According to *God’s great mercy* he has caused us to be born again. This is God’s work in us, for we *by God’s power* are being guarded *through faith*. What is the source of our faith? God! Peter is not suggesting we have to muster up ever more quantities of faith.

When Peter says the tested genuineness of our faith results in praise and glory and honor to the Lord Jesus, this is evidence of God’s work in us. The pressure ain’t on us! As we go through trials, God is showing us his great mercy. He is showing us his power at work in us. He is showing all of creation the greatness of his salvation that is being poured out on us, even in the midst of various trials.

Peter then returns to his concession. He says we rejoice in the gospel *though* we go through various trials. Further, *though* we have not seen the Lord Jesus and *though* we do not see him now, we believe in him and we rejoice with joy. Peter recognizes his audience has not seen what he has seen. In the words of the apostle John in his first letter, Peter can say, “That which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands”, meaning he and the other apostles physically walked and talked with Jesus. We have not.

Even though we have not, Peter is thrilled that in the midst of various trials we still rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory. You and I walk by faith. Peter’s original recipients walk by faith. We’ve never seen him and we do not currently see him, yet we believe in the witness and testimony of those who have. It is this faith in him that obtains the outcome: our salvation.

Dismal Realities and Inexpressible Outcomes

Despite the dismal realities faced by many Christians throughout history, there has been great rejoicing. There is joy in the midst of sorrow, joy in the midst of pain, joy in the midst of suffering, joy in the midst of loss. Even as we weep and lament, there is joy.

Peter’s original recipients were Jewish Christians. Some scholars believe they were among those who had been kicked out of the city of Rome by emperor Claudius in the year 49. This means they had lost inheritances—land they perhaps owned in or around Rome. They may have lost possessions, depending on how suddenly they were forced to leave. They certainly lost their social connections, whether family or other loved ones.

Peter reminds them even if they've lost everything in this world, they rejoice for God's great mercy is evident in them and will result in an inheritance of all things—an inheritance that cannot be lost or taken away or otherwise destroyed. Many of them were now suffering the loss of family and culture. Christians were being rejected by their fellow Jews on account of “giving up” their Jewishness. Jewish Christians no longer looked to the temple for salvation. They no longer adhered to the law of Moses as necessary for following Christ.

They were accused of abandoning their ancient traditions so Peter points them to the truth. The salvation they experience *in the present* and *in the midst of their suffering* was not an abandonment of their ancient traditions. Rather, this salvation is the very salvation the prophets prophesied would come! Their salvation in Christ *is* the ancient tradition!

He says in verse 10 the prophets prophesied about the grace that was to be theirs. That is, the prophets themselves did not see the fulfillment in their lifetime. They looked forward to seeing it, but they themselves did not experience it.

Instead, they were prophesying for future generations who would experience that salvation. They “searched and inquired carefully”. They were trying to figure out what the Spirit of Christ—the Holy Spirit—was revealing. He says the prophets predicted the sufferings of Jesus and his subsequent glories without fully understanding them. These are the Scriptures Paul mentioned to the Corinthians.

¹ Cor 15:3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

1 Corinthians 15:3–5

Christ suffered and died. The prophets predicted this. Christ was buried and then rose from the dead in complete and utter victory. The prophets predicted this. They did not fully understand this! Even Jesus' own apostles didn't understand that all those times he told them he would go to Jerusalem and would be beaten and falsely tried and crucified and then rise from the dead he meant he would go to Jerusalem and would be beaten and falsely tried and crucified and then rise from the dead.

If they, those who walked and were taught directly by the one the prophets predicted didn't understand, how would the prophets!? Peter says this is why they diligently searched and inquired. They understood, however, they were not serving themselves in their prophesies, but those who would believe in the one they spoke of. In verse 12 he clarifies exactly what he means. The prophets predicted the very good news—the gospel—that the Holy Spirit announced through his evangelists.

Peter tells them they have it better than the prophets for while the prophets could not understand fully what they proclaimed, Peter's readers have an understanding of the gospel denied to the very prophets who predicted it! He goes a step further. *Even angels* long to look into this more. Angels long to understand and comprehend the enormity of the gospel. Angels—the very beings who have access to the direct and immediate presence of God, beings who have experienced the glory of God directly, cannot comprehend the gospel the way you and I comprehend it, for you and I *experience* it.

Think of what Peter is saying here. The prophets were led by the Holy Spirit to predict the *sufferings* of Christ. How did that turn out? They also predicted “the subsequent

glories”—the resurrection of Christ, which is his victory over sin and death. They predicted terrible suffering, and the outcome of that suffering, which is salvation. Consider what the author of Hebrews tells us. We must be

Heb 12:2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Hebrews 12:2

Notice that joy was not a *future* joy, but a joy that was, in the midst of suffering, set right in front of him. The language of the original is tricky because the word translated “for” has the idea of one thing in place of another. The meaning appears to be that Jesus, because of the joy he experienced in the midst of suffering, despised the shame of the cross. Death on a cross was shameful; he despised the shame. He disregarded it. He viewed it with contempt. One lexicon glosses the meaning as “to consider something not important enough to be an object of concern when evaluated against something else” (BDAG, *καταφρονέω*.) He *embraced* the cross on account of the joy he experienced in the midst of his suffering. His suffering, the shame of the cross, did not define him or determine his joy! Compared to the salvation he was bringing, his suffering, the shame of the cross, was as nothing.

In comparison to what he knew the outcome would be, the suffering and shame of the cross was not important enough to be an object of concern. This does not minimize his very real suffering. This does not mean Jesus did not feel pain or sorrow. This means his perspective of that pain was that in comparison to its outcome, it was worth enduring. He saw his Father at work through the suffering, which is Peter’s point in our text.

Christmas

Earlier I referred to our text as a “classic Christmas” text. That was only partly tongue-in-cheek, for the original Christmas was God’s invasion of a world that is hostile to him and to the peace he has come to bring. It was an invasion, but not so that we can dream of a white Christmas where the treetops glisten and children listen to hear sleigh bells in the snow. God became one of us and came to this world to bring *salvation*. Here is how he put it in his own words.

Lk 4:16 And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. ¹⁷ And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, ¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ And he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” ²² And all

spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?”

Luke 4:16–22

“Isn’t this the guy we’ve known his entire life?” Think of what those who were there must have been thinking. They remember when he learned to walk. They remember his five-year-old attempts at knock-knock jokes. They remember the awkward middle-school years. They remember the very ordinary Jesus, who worked as a carpenter, who had been raised by Mary and Joseph, who had to learn carpentry. Now he’s claiming to be the one who would proclaim good news to the poor, proclaim liberty to the captives, heal those who were blind, and set at liberty those who are oppressed? Luke says they marveled when he said this.

Luke went on to say that Jesus also said he hadn’t come for just the people of Israel. He had come to rescue all nations—the Gentiles. He said that just as the prophet Elijah offered help to a Gentile widow during a famine and not Israelite widows, so he had come to rescue *the nations*. In that same paragraph Luke writes,

Lk 4:28 When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. ²⁹ And they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff. ³⁰ But passing through their midst, he went away.

Luke 4:28–30

In this we see the beginning of Jesus despising the shame of the cross, pursuing the joy his Father set before him. He knew why he had come and he would let nothing stop that pursuit. He had come to rescue his people from sin and death, and from suffering and oppression. To accomplish this he had to die.

Christmas isn’t about sentiment, but about rescue. Christmas isn’t about giving presents, but about receiving presence—*his presence*, for God has come to dwell among us. Christmas is about our Rescuer coming to rescue us, first from ourselves, and then from sin and death.

The problem with perfect Christmas cards, sappy and sentimental Christmas songs, artfully decorated Christmas homes, and all the artifice that goes with the holiday season is it is meant to inspire holiday cheer—you know, *that Christmas feeling*. (If you sent those Christmas cards, great! I received several and I love them. That’s not my point!) The Son of God did not take on human flesh in order to stir up our emotions. God himself did not perform the truly incomprehensible miracle of becoming a human in order to stir our emotions. Christmas was never to be about *emotion* at all, but about joy! There is a vast difference between joy and emotion!

Too often we want Christmas to be the thing that enables us to skip over the unpleasant and painful realities of life and go for the emotions of sentimental, feel-good, artificial and forced happiness. I know for many Christmas—the entirety of the holiday season—can be extremely difficult. It is part of the “various trials” Peter mentions! This suffering can come from wanting to give your kids the world, but not being able to—especially for single parents. There is a shame and a profound sense of inadequacy we feel when we cannot buy our loved ones the thing we want to give them. This should not be. Your kids don’t need presents. They need *you*.

For others Christmas is an in-your-face reminder of those who are not with us, whether by sinful choices or by circumstances. Whether there remains hope of reconciliation, or there is no hope of reconciliation, or there is no possibility—at least in this life—of reconciliation, Christmas can be marked more by a sense of who isn't there than by who is.

Christmas isn't about wanting a hippopotamus or seeing Mommy kissing Santa Claus. It isn't about Grandmas and reindeer or whatever in the world “Mele Kalikimaka” is. (Yes, I know; the song tells us.) It isn't about what you did with the heart I gave you last Christmas and what I'm going to do this year to save me from tears. It isn't about having yourself “a Merry Little Christmas”. It certainly isn't about white snow.

Christmas is an annual reminder that we need rescue—and that rescue has come! Whether it's a cancer diagnosis or it's your father dying the day after Christmas—or twenty years before this Christmas—or it's losing your job through no fault of your own or the never-ending family drama that you're forced to endure—especially when it's directed at you, whatever the source of suffering, Christmas is the promise that you need a rescuer, and he has come!

In this classic Christmas text, the apostle Peter points us to the one who has come to rescue us and details for us many reasons he is worthy of praise. Let us remember the words of Karen Jobes:

Doxology provides the context for Christians' new life in Christ (1:3–5) because both their experience of suffering grief in trials (1:6–7) and their present and ultimate salvation is the goal not only of their faith but also of the plan of God as revealed to the prophets (1:8–12).

Karen H. Jobes, BECNT

Doxology ought to create in us a longing for more, a longing for what is good and right, a longing for God himself to once again appear on this earth—though this time, for eternity. Doxology is praising God for who he is and for what he has done. What has he done? He has given us hope.

Peter says *in the midst of suffering* there is hope. Because there is hope—*real, living hope*—there is also joy. This hope is not wishful thinking, but a living hope. It is the present experience of hope, the sure knowledge that not only will this suffering not last, but what replaces this suffering will so far surpass it that the sting of suffering will be gone forever, this is what gives us joy. This is the life God has given us to live, a life of joy in the midst of sorrow. Christmas means suffering will end, for this is why God invaded his world. This is why Christmas has come. This is why Jesus has come.

How we get there, how we get through the trouble and the pain, the hardship and the difficulty, the suffering and lament, is doxology. We worship. We praise the one who is worthy to be praised. Here's the remarkable thing, the point Peter is making: when we begin with praise and worship our God, when we begin with doxology, we receive a direct benefit, for God strengthens us through it. We were made for worship. We were created to worship. When we worship, God works in us to strengthen us. God continually gives us reason to worship him.

Joy is not dependent on our circumstances. Joy is dependent entirely on the God who took on human flesh that he might rescue us and make us his people and save us from sin and death. Joy is dependent entirely on the God who walks with us and carries us through every

trial, every tear, every lament, and every moment of suffering. Joy is dependent entirely on the one who gives us every reason to praise him. That reason is found directly in the hope and in the inheritance that is ours in Christ. That reason is the Lord Jesus himself, our God who is forever with us.

Merry Christmas.