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**Series: Moving Onward Towards Perfection**  
**Sermon: Wesley's and the Evangelical Revival**

### **I Peter 1:3-9**

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. This inheritance is 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 all 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 the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—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 end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

### **Sermon**

In December of 1985, at the ripe old age of 12, I received a diary as a gift. Each page had a date and a whole bunch of lines to write down your activities, musings, secrets, hopes and dreams. You could record every thought and idea that crossed your mind. So January 1<sup>st</sup>, I started my diary. I remember writing down every hope and dream for 1986. I didn't have the word at the time, but these were my goals for the year. What I wanted to accomplish. I wrote a lot of stuff down on January 1<sup>st</sup>, half as much on January 2<sup>nd</sup>. A little on January 3<sup>rd</sup>. So on and so on, and by halfway thru January, I was done writing in the diary. It seems that a 12 year old has either very little say, or else has the attention span of a distracted goldfish. But this is the time of year where we make our resolutions, make known our destination, set the course, right the ship, this is where we're going. This is what we'll be doing. And for many, these resolutions stick. People have lost weight. Gotten rid of debt. Stopped smoking. Volunteered more. Told their spouse I love you once a day. Not yelled at the kids for small infractions. Recycled. Whatever it is for you. But for many, these pie in the sky declarations stay just that. Declarations. With good will and high hopes, some seem to face hardships in making these hopes and dreams a reality. We lack time, determination, and perseverance to push through. If you've made resolutions this year, I pray you keep them - and find the strength and fortitude to see them done. Don't let them fall to the wayside. Turn to your neighbor and say, "Good luck, we're all counting on you."

For the next two months, we will be reading from one of the General letters, found in the New Testament, after the Gospels, after Acts, after all of the letters from Paul. We get to a series of general letters. James has one, Peter writes a few, John has three (First, Second and Third John), and the last one is Jude. We call them the General Letters because they went to a general audience. Paul, on the other hand, was always writing to certain towns or provinces. Paul's letter to the Romans which we call Romans. Paul's two letters to the Corinthians, which we call First and Second Corinthians. His letters to Timothy, which we call First and Second Timothy. And there's a few more, you get the idea. They weren't creative in the titling of these books. But other folk wrote a few letters as well - to a general audience. And we are going to pitch our camp in the Book of First Peter for the next few months. Peter, the Disciple of Jesus. Peter, the fisherman. The one who walked on water, the one who denied him three times, who found redemption when the risen savior called on him to continue the work. Whom the Catholics call the First Pope. That Peter. And we have a couple of letters from him in the New Testament, for all of the faithful. Some scholars believe it was disciples of Peter that wrote the book, in his name, and style, but for now, we'll go with it came from him.

We are not sure where it was written. In the fifth chapter, Peter says that he is in Babylon. It could mean actual Babylon, although history doesn't put him there for anything else in his life. It could be a small town in Egypt, a military post called Babylon, or it could be in Rome - which had the nickname Babylon by a few Christians as a place of immorality, decadence, power, and unmitigated evil. I put my money on Rome. Why's that, I hear you ask? Because we know that Peter ends up in Rome. He is martyred there 64 A. D., at a time when the Emperors weren't exactly known for their sanity. Nero just burned Rome. Blamed the Christians. And all hell broke loose for the Christians living in that Capital. Thousands were crucified. Many fed to the lions or found their way into the gladiatorial pits. It wasn't a great time. And many of these Christians were second generation Christians. The Easter stories were already 30 years old. There weren't a whole lot of folk around that remembered those days. So when we read today's passage, read it with those ears. You have an Emperor out to get you. Your friends are being rounded up. You're faith in Christ is literal faith - you don't have first hand knowledge of all of these stories. So Peter writes a letter. I'll cherry pick a few lines that were read today. Try to listen to these words as a Christian in Rome would hear them, during these dark days. "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. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you" . . . "though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. 7 These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire" Not metaphorical fire - but fire fire. 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 end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Makes a difference. Peter is rallying the troops. Helping them persevere what they are going through. Keeping faith alive through difficult times. Find Strength and Fortitude. Do not let your faith go by the wayside. Turn to your neighbor and say, "Keep believing".

These are trying times for our church as well. We don't face the specter of crucifixion or our city burning down and us being blamed for it - although our church did burn down a hundred years ago this November and take with it a few businesses - we'll talk more about that in the fall. No, our main issue in Methodism at the moment revolves around Human Sexuality and how open and welcoming we are. What is the official church position, and how that relates to what each church or pastor or layperson may believe. For decades, we've been able to live in some form of unity even though many differ on their views on this subject. Our particular church's motto is Love Others Value Everyone. Read into it what you may. Not every Methodist Church would have such a slogan. Every four years, we have a General Conference to affirm or change our doctrine and how we do church. What we believe and how we live out our Christian witness. At our last General Conference in 2016, we were at an impasse, one that has been growing in divisions over the years. So in 2016, we did a Methodist thing: We formed a committee to come up with recommendations. It's more nuanced and spiritual than that, but that's an easy way to describe it. This team, A Way Forward, came up with three major plans and gave the Council of Bishops their top choice of these plans. This hot potato issue is at a decisive moment in our church, many churches say they will leave if we go this way, many churches say they will leave if we go thataway. Annual Conferences may also go depending on the outcome. The top choice given to the Bishops is called the One Church Plan, where we try to stay together under the same tent, but each Annual Conference or church is given latitude on how we approach human sexuality. Nobody thinks this plan is perfect. But it could be another step forward in how our church has changed over the years. There are other plans they could consider. We have a specially called General Conference in late February of this year. Nobody knows what's going to happen. But I do know this: We as a church will survive. And continue to preach the Word. Teach Christ. And Love Others Value Everyone. So in each sermon between now and then, I want to share a little bit of history, to show we've been down this road before, and have survived. This church has seen a lot on it's 178 years. How did we get through past struggles?

So how did it all begin? All Wesleyan and Methodist Christians are connected to the lives and ministries of

John Wesley and his brother, Charles. This is 1700's England. Both had gone to Georgia as missionaries, but it didn't turn out so good, so back to England with the both of them. Soon after, they had transforming religious experiences where they felt that they had been Saved. One evening, dull in heart and thinking about giving up the preaching gig, he reluctantly attended a meeting in Aldersgate. Someone read from Luther's Preface to the Epistle to Romans. This is what John said in his diary, which he kept at longer than a 12 year old might, About 8:45 p.m. "while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death." Shortly thereafter, both brothers began preaching a message of new birth and sanctification in Anglican religious societies and outdoors to whomever would listen. They also established missional and philanthropic enterprises to promote social change. The goal of this movement was to "reform the nation, particularly the church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land." Over time a pattern of organization and discipline emerged. It included a set of General Rules, societies made up of class meetings (small groups in which members of Methodist societies watched over one another), and band meetings, all connected by traveling lay preachers. How is it with your soul became paramount. This was the start of something new. A faith that was both personal and social. And the Methodist movement took off. And I can hear the words of Peter cheering them on, "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 end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls."

The Wesley's were always Anglican, The Church of England priests. Never left, even though their movement would eventual begin a new church, but we'll get to that next week. In the meantime, keep First Peter in your thoughts, whether they be about our current struggles and hardships, or in the faith that you hold in your heart, or in the resolutions you hope to keep in these next weeks an months ahead. I hope it makes a difference. Peter is rallying the troops. Helping them persevere what they are going through. Keeping faith alive through difficult times. Find Strength and Fortitude. Do not let your faith go by the wayside. Keep believing. And the family of God said, AMEN.