

The ethos, the reason for being, of the sometimes forgotten branch of the military is this: "I serve the people of the United States. I will protect them. I will defend them. I will save them. I am their shield. For them I am *Semper Paratus*." Always prepared. Truly the Coast Guard is. Always ready to rush out into the storm to help stranded or lost ships, which they did over 19,000 times in 2012. Always ready to save a life which they did 3,500 times in 2012. Or always ready to intercept people trying to get things into the country illegally, which they did 436,000 times screening 29.5 million crewmembers and passengers in 2012. The Coast Guard certainly lives up to its motto *Semper Paratus*, always prepared.

Like all branches of the military these individuals take an oath to serve and put themselves into places and situations normal everyday people like you and me can't and probably shouldn't. Members of the military substitute themselves for us, giving their lives for our freedom. We honor them this Memorial Day. But no amount of heroic substitution by the military can ever be our heart of living hope.

As we near the end of our study of the first letter of Peter we get to the true heart of living hope. Peter gives us what really makes up hope and what that gives to us. So in the second lesson we listen as Peter tells us...

The heart of living hope is substitution
Gives us absolute answers
Gives us atonement for our sins

The just for the unjust. Jesus was completely just. He was righteous before God, perfect in everything. Perfect in everything he did, said, and thought. His life was perfect from beginning to end. He lived his life without sin, without doubt, without any shred of disobedience towards God and towards anyone else. Opposite of that is us, unjust. Completely and totally unrighteous before God. Less than perfect. We have stained consciences. We have mountains of sins. We're anything but perfect.

Unjust people have an impossible situation. Our souls are in real danger of being lost forever because we can't come before God as sinful. We're without hope and without solution. The heart of living hope for us is substitution. The just, Christ Jesus, coming to substitute himself for the unjust, you and me. **"For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God."** Jesus, like the Coast Guard, is always prepared. Always prepared Jesus stepped into our place. He became what he was not so we could go where we did not belong naturally. Christ Jesus died for sins that weren't his own, but were ours. Christ brought us, you and me, into his family, brought us into a right relationship with him, and brought us to God. Without Christ we'd have no chance of getting right with God. Christ is more than a chance. Jesus our substitute brings us to God. The heart of living hope is substitution, Christ Jesus substituting himself for you and me.

Good news brings more. The heart of living hope is substitution and hope gives you absolute answers. There's very little question on how God wants you to live your life. Obedience and love are his expectations. When the world sees you living differently from everyone else questions naturally come. Suffering brings questions too. Someone who endures, who doesn't give up hope, who lives opposite of the world all leads to questions. When they ask your living hope can give absolute answers. Not brilliant sales pitches, catchy one liners, or reasonable arguments that will win the day. No we speak of substitution. We have living hope and absolute answers in Christ.

We might like the heart of living hope to be a sales pitch. We could pay for TV ads, radio spots, and make our pitch or our reasonable argument to the world. But those would only take credit from Christ. We might speak with arrogance about our faith, our church, or our way of life. We might downplay someone else's religion as stupid and tell them so. That lack of respect isn't helpful. **"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have, but do this with gentleness and respect."** Gentleness, not demeaning speak. Respect, not fear of offending them but respect a fear of offending God. Fear changing the absolute answers of the Lord into something less offensive, less obnoxious, or less scary to talk about.

God chooses to give absolute answers about living hope to the world through you and me. We share because Peter says we are to **"in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord."** Christ is Lord. Jesus showed himself to be the Son of God during his earthly life. He showed himself to be Lord of all by dying and then rising again three days later. We might think we know suffering, but Jesus knew suffering. His suffering was substitutionary suffering. He was doing it for us. He is the Lord and the Savior. We aren't sharing bad news. Peter focuses on good news, a substitute who triumphed over sin and Satan. A substitute who stepped up and died for us and then rose again. A substitute whose resurrection is everything because it is the heart of living hope.

Even if we face embarrassment, threats, or danger we can express our living hope. We can be *semper paratus*, always prepared. Our risen Savior loves us and we love our risen Savior. His promises lead us to obedience. Obedience means we must defend our faith, give answers when asked. This isn't optional. This is what Christians do. But what can we say? Think about it ahead of time. Maybe write something down. Be always ready with the basics. Perhaps think 4 key concepts: sin, grace, faith, and works. The Bible tells us we're all sinful before him, that's sin. The Bible says because God loved us while we were sinners he sent Christ Jesus to die for our sins, that's grace. We're called to believe what Christ has already done for us and we can because the Holy Spirit gives us faith to believe, that's faith. And finally we naturally will do things because we love God who first loved us, that's works. Simple is better, easy to remember, thought out ahead of time, these will help you share your absolute answers for the living hope you have.

1 billion people may have been on the planet when Noah built the ark. Not all 1 billion were watching Noah. But some were, and heard Noah *semper paratus*, always prepared with absolute answers to questions. “Why you building this thing?” “Because God is going to judge the world with destruction.” “Do you think you’re better than us because God spoke to you and not to us?” “No, in fact I don’t deserve to have God speaking to me either. I’m thankful God intends to save whoever is in this ark.” “Ah, I don’t believe it. God won’t judge anyone. We haven’t done anything that bad.” “But you have, and I have too. That’s why we need God to save us. Repent, change your ways, and believe God’s promises that he will send a substitute.” Noah had living hope and the heart of that hope was substitution. He, along with 7 others, were saved. Millions died. The substitute God sent for Noah and his family, and for the world gives us atonement for sins.

Sins can keep us from God. We can’t rely on ourselves to change the situation for the better. We need atonement. Someone has to bring us back to being ‘at one’ with God. God is the solution, Christ atones for all of our sins. The judgment Jesus faced on the cross was the payment for our sins. Jesus faced what we should’ve faced. He faced suffering for our sins perfectly and endured. It looked destructive ending in death, but through it God saved you and me. The waters of the flood were the same, they looked destructive but through those floodwaters God saved some. **“And this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”** Baptismal waters don’t look destructive, but they are saving us just the same. By the promises of God that water is destroying sin, making us clean spiritually, and connecting us to Christ’s resurrection. We need not fear or worry about our sins anymore. Christ is the heart of our living hope, our substitute who gives atonement for our sins.

Further proof of our living hope is when Jesus descends into hell. **“He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built.”** What we confess in the Apostles’ Creed, that Jesus descended into hell, wasn’t about second chances. It was a victory march in the enemy’s back yard. Jesus was victorious. Satan was crushed. God demonstrated his patience and showcased his love. Everyone gets a time of grace, a time to come to repentance and faith. God is long suffering, but it doesn’t last forever. Now is the time. Now is when we need to be *semper paratus*, always prepared to believe in God’s atonement through Jesus and speak of the heart of living hope with others.

We appreciate having the Coast Guard and all branches of the military to guard and protect us. They’ve done it bravely for many years. Thankfully the Coast Guard is *Semper Paratus*, always prepared. Our sin needs more to be safe and secure before God. God himself steps in. We need Christ Jesus our substitute. His substitution for us gives absolute answers to those who wonder how we’re saved. His substitution gives us atonement for all our sins. The heart of our living hope is the substitution of Christ Jesus for each one of us.