

Hometown Exiles: Alert and Sober-minded

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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1 Peter 1:13, 4:7-8, 5:8-9

So we continue our hometown exiles series, and we continue thinking about how a hometown exile carries herself in the world. So far we've heard about how hometown exiles relate to the governing authorities. We've heard how they respond to evil with good and blessing, and we've heard how they operate out of humility—a deep willingness to confess their weakness to God and share it with each other. Today we focus on another quality that Peter calls for from exiles. It's a little imperative phrase that shows up not once, not twice, but three times in this letter. Three times Peter calls hometown exiles to be alert and sober-minded.

Let's read all the verses where it comes up. He first uses the phrase in 1:13. After joyfully proclaiming the inheritance they have in Jesus—an inheritance that will never perish, spoil or fade, and is kept in heaven for them—Peter says, *“Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming.”* The next usage is in chapter 4. I'll read both verse 7 and 8, *“The end of all things is near. Therefore, be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray. Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.”* And finally Peter offers his exhortation one more time in 5:8-9, *“Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.”*

On September 28, 1994, the ferry *Estonia* was making its way across the Baltic Sea from Tallinn, Estonia to Stockholm, Sweden. Its course took it directly into the path of a fierce autumn storm. Halfway across there was a loud sound of scraping metal. It was the sound of the ship's front hatchway giving way. A large wave hit the big door at the prow of the ship through which cars enter and sheared it right off. Water poured in. Within 45 minutes the ship sank, taking 850 people to the bottom of the sea. It was the second worst marine disaster of the 20th century, second only to the Titanic.

Back in the early 2000's William Langewiesche wrote an article in *The Atlantic* recreating the last moments of the disaster. He reviewed 120 survivor accounts and he was able to recreate the terror and struggle. If you read his harrowing account, what jumps out at you is the behavior of the passengers during that 45-minute window between the moment the door fell off, and the moment the *Estonia* slipped beneath the waves. The behavior of the passengers during that horrific time was a *pretty good catalogue* of how humans behave under pressure.

You saw three main categories of behavior. Most of the people became frantic. They lost control. For some, that panic showed itself as aggression. They pushed towards the lifeboats determined to survive, paying little attention to anyone but themselves and their family. Langewiesche reports that some of the stronger passengers fought for life jackets, ripping them off the back of weaker

passengers. For others, the pressure made them go limp. Some people simply resigned themselves to death, sitting calmly in the corridors of the sinking ship, neither panicking, nor making any attempt to save themselves. Fear so overwhelmed them they couldn't function. These first two categories—aggression and paralysis—described most of the people on the boat.

A small minority of the people showed kindness. Langewiesche reports crew members who put themselves in danger to form a human chain to pull people to safety. He tells of another man who, in the midst of the storm, was going up to terrified people and calmly telling them that everything would be okay. He taught hysterical people how to put on their life vests. He set up a system for their distribution.

Aggression, paralysis, and kindness. When Langewiesche's story and when I read about the people's reactions, I couldn't help but ask myself, "What would I have done? *"How would I have reacted in those 45 minutes?"*

As we have already said multiple times in this series, Peter's letter is written to people under pressure. They're exiles. The culture is against them. They are socially and economically marginalized. They might not be the victims of full on persecution yet, but they will be soon. Within 50 years, Christians are being arrested and executed in Asia Minor. The situation is bad enough that in the last of the three passages I read, Peter says that it's like a roaring lion is menacing them. "The devil prowls like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour." That's a pressurized situation. If there was a roaring lion roaming around your neighborhood, it might cause panic. *But there is no panic in Peter.* Under that enormous pressure, he doesn't go limp, nor does he get wildly aggressive. Instead, in the face of their suffering, in the face of the hostility, in the face of the roaring lion, Peter calls them (and us) to be alert and sober-minded.

Let's dig into that instruction together this morning. Let's get a rich sense of the kind of people God is calling us to be under pressure and in the face of fearful circumstances. In the English, all three instructions, use the same words, but if you look at the Greek there's some variation, some nuance that can help us get a deeper sense of what Peter is saying.

The Greek word for sober-minded is the same in all three passages. It's *nepfos*, which means sober; the opposite of drunk. In this case Peter isn't talking about actual drunkenness, he's talking about getting yourself worked up into a state of mind where your passion, your fear, your worry causes you to do something rash. When you are really, really angry, or when you are really, really afraid, you're not technically drunk, but you are in a state where it is hard to think straight. Like alcohol, anger and fear can take over your senses, make you say and do things you regret the next morning. So the word 'nepfos' paints a picture of someone who stays clear-headed in the middle of craziness. In the midst of crazy times, a nepfos person is like the designated driver. She keeps a clear head. She doesn't lose herself in the moment. The world needs people like that in crazy times. Anchored people who make sure the 'party' doesn't get out of hand.

So the word for sober-minded is the same in all three passages, but the Greek word translated as alert is actually different in each of our passages. 'Alert' is a reasonable translation of all three Greek words, but each of the three calls for a

slightly different kinds of alertness. In 1:13 the word alert translates a whole Greek phrase. In the Greek, it literally says ‘*Gird up the loins of your mind.*’ That’s how it’s translated in the Old King James version. Gird up the loins of your mind. Funny story about that translation. Galen Meyer, a member of our church who taught Bible and religion at South Christian used to have 1 Peter 1:13 in the King James Version on the wall of his classroom. He thought it was a good image for young students about how to express their gratitude to God through disciplined study. Every year, as part of his devotions, he would have students read that verse out loud. One year he asked an eager young student to read the verse and, in a loud voice, the young man began to read: "Gird up the 'low-ins' of your mind," This strange new word caused the young man to pause in his reading. “Rev Meyer,” he said, "I think you misspelled that word, Isn't it supposed to be lions?"

Well, while it may be good to gird up the lions of our mind, Peter’s reference is different. In the ancient world a person girded their loins when they took their long robe and tucked it up into their belt. Having the robe tucked up like that made it easier to do work. So a person with girded loins was ready for work, ready for action. It was sort of the ancient version of putting on your Carhartts. When Peter calls for it, I’m pretty sure he’s thinking of the Passover. Just a couple of verses later he will remind the people that they were saved by “the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.” That’s a Passover reference. When the Israelites chose a lamb for the feast, it had to be a lamb without defect. So Peter is in a Passover frame of mind. Do you remember how God told the Israelites to eat the first Passover, how they were to be dressed? Exodus 12:11 “This is how you are to eat it: *with your cloak tucked in your belt*, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand.” You ate the Passover with girded loins. Which means God wanted you eat the Passover in expectation. Eat it expecting that God will deliver you. Eat it expecting that the living God will do something that he is able, to rescue you from your distress, that he is bigger than the hostility that surrounds you.

When Peter calls us to gird up the loins of our mind, he’s calling us to habits of hope and expectation. He’s calling us to have minds that expect God to set free, to right the wrongs. Gird up the loins of your mind so that when God acts, you will be ready to act with him. Gird up the loins of your mind so that you can see beneath the surface of events. For the Israelites, eating the Passover in Egypt, the true story of the world isn’t Pharaoh and his power, it’s the story of the living God who will save them and bring them to the promised land. For the little churches of Asia Minor, the true story of the world is not Caesar and his power, it’s the story of Jesus in whom they have an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. And for us the true story of our life is not what’s happening in Washington (or Ottawa or London or Paris) or what leads on the breaking news, it’s the story of the God who will make all things new. So be alert and sober minded.

In the second verse, the word for alert is *sophronaysate*, which suggests self-control and moderation. I don’t have time to say much about that. Obviously that further emphasizes that picture of steadiness in the storm. Let me also note that in 4:7, Peter calls us to be sober-minded *so that we can pray*. Prayer also sharpens our expectation of God’s action and presence in the middle of the chaos.

Finally, in chapter 5 the word translated as ‘be alert’ is *gregoreo*. That’s a word that also means keep watch. So the call to be alert is a call to be watchful. In this case I think it’s pretty clear that the watchfulness is about watching out for the prowling lion who seek to devour God’s people. Peter is saying, watch out, times of stress and pressure are times when the devil can get a foothold in your life. The evil one will use times of stress and pressure to get hold of your heart. Go back to the behavior of the people on the boat. That’s a pretty good picture of what happens. When we are under pressure and stress, the devil can easily drive us to a paralyzing fear that keeps us from doing what we should do, OR to a fearful anger that lashes out and does desperate things. Be watchful, be alert to the ways the devil uses fear and anger to sow division and chaos.

That’s a timely word. In our pressurized times, it is easier for the evil one to make inroads. When it feels like everything is going crazy, it is easy for us to be pushed to do reckless angry things. But somehow, buy the power of the Spirit and in the grip of God’s grace, we are called to live a different kind of life. I think of that exemplary person on the ferry in Langewiesche’s story, the one who was distributing the life jackets and teaching people who to wear them, telling people that it would be okay. That’s a picture of who God calls us to be. Not distributing life jackets of course, but standing in the middle of the chaos, living with kindness, practicing hope, helping the strugglers and pointing to our Savior. Alert and sober-minded in the midst of the craziness.

I think it very likely that Peter’s repeated call to be alert and sober minded comes out of hard lessons learned in his own past. Do you remember how Peter behaved under pressure? Specifically, do you remember how he behaved in the garden of Gethsemane when Jesus was arrested? The garden of Gethsemane is a little bit like the story of the sinking ferry. It too is a catalogue of the different ways people react under pressure. How does Peter react when the soldiers show up in the garden to arrest Jesus? According to John 18, he takes out his sword and starts swinging it around. He cuts off the ear of the high priest’s servant. He’s not alert and sober-minded. He swings wildly. He panics. He’s like the people who fight for life jackets on the boat. Many of the other disciples go limp. They abandon Jesus and flee. So the disciples demonstrate the two main human reactions to pressure. Flight and fight. But Jesus shows a third way, a new way. In the face of pressure, he stays Alert and Sober. In the face of pressure, he keeps loving and praying. In the face of the pressure, he keeps doing his Father’s will right to the end. Not flailing. Not fainting. Loving. Bleeding. Dying. Rising. And ultimately, sending the ancient powers of evil into confusion and retreat.

This is more than an example of how to behave in pressurized time, it is the center of our hope. His cross is the still point amidst the ups and downs of history. The cross is the anchor that holds in the midst of the storms. The cross is the place where Christ’s love shows itself stronger than hate, and fear that wants us to flail and panic. Keep your eyes on Jesus everyone, and then go out into the world alert, and fully sober.

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