

Hometown Exiles: Called to His Eternal Glory

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

October 25, 2020 Worship Service

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1 Peter 5:8-14

Today is the last sermon in our Hometown Exiles series. Our text will be the last 7 verses of the letter, although I will refer to the whole of the letter and its message. I will read verses 8-14, but I will focus on verses 10 and 11. In those verses, you will hear Peter demonstrating habit of mind that Hometown Exiles have. Listen to where Peter's mind goes, listen to where he points our minds in verses 10 and 11.

So where does Peter direct our minds in verses 10 and 11? He points us to heaven. He points us to the heavenly places. He points us to the eternal glory they have in Christ. *"The God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast."*

Peter often points in that direction. In his letter, he points to the hope of heaven and to the hope of Christ's return on multiple occasions. Over the course of the whole letter, I count at least 9 times where Peter lifts our eyes towards heaven and the return of Jesus. The first time he does it is 1:4. He proclaims our inheritance that can never perish spoil or fade which is kept *in heaven* for us. Just 3 verses later he does it again *"Your trials have come so that your faith may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."* In 1:13, Peter calls the people *"to set their hope on the grace to be brought to you when Christ is revealed."* In Chapter 3:22 he tells us we are connected to Jesus by baptism and, *"Jesus has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand-with angels, authorities and power in submission to him."* In chapter 4:5 he reminds them that all people must *"give account to the One who will judge the living and the dead."* Put it all together, and it's pretty clear that Peter has a lively sense of heaven and the return of Jesus. Put it all together, and it's pretty clear that Peter wants us to have a lively sense of heaven and the return of Jesus. Peter wants the people reading his letter to walk around with the sense that Jesus was coming back to judge the living and the dead. He wants the heavenly realm to be a part of their everyday consciousness.

Which raises an obvious question. Is the heavenly realm part of our everyday consciousness? Do we have a lively sense of the second coming? We still believe in it, of course. When we say the Creed we say that 'he shall come again to judge the living and the dead.' But does that living hope, that sense of Christ's return, shape our daily lives and decisions? Not really. Not in my experience. I don't wake up thinking 'I hope Jesus comes back today.' I don't hear most of us talking about Christ's return. We talk more about hopes for our retirement than the hope of heaven.

There are good reasons for this. We don't think about it so much because it has been so long. If this letter was written in 64 AD, it was written only 30 years after Jesus went up into heaven and promised to come back. Many people assumed-wrongly as it turned out-that that return would be soon so they were really poised for the event. Now that it's 2000 years later, we are less poised. We expect to die like the rest of our ancestors, so we're not talking about the return of Christ,

Also we're not so focused on it because we've seen people who get a little crazy when they think about the second coming. People like Harold Camping. Harold came out of our tribe. He grew up Christian Reformed, got his own radio ministry and soon he started using that radio

ministry to make wild predictions about the end of the world. Specifically, he predicted that the world would end on May 21, 2011. There were billboards in town, remember? Harold was very passionate and convincing. People gave him money. A lot of money! But May 2011 came and went and Harold was proved wrong. Within two years he was dead, but not before messing up a lot of people's lives.

Finally, many modern Christians aren't thinking about the life to come because we are pretty happy with the life we have. Measured in the long sweep of history, we are prosperous and secure. And as someone once observed-I think it might have been Rich Mouw-when we are in hard times, when life is hard and resources are scarce, that is when Christians sing heaven songs: "*This world is not my home. I just passin' through.*" But when we are doing well, we literally change our tune. We start singing "This is My Father's World!" We think less about the hereafter and more about the here and now.

So for all these reasons, we don't think about Christ's return and we don't hope for Christ's return. *And that's too bad.* Because a little more focus on heaven and the return of Jesus is not just what God wants for us, it's also good for us. I want reflect on why Peter wants us, why God wants us to have a lively sense of the reality of heaven and Christ's return.

Let's start here: Thinking about heaven helps us see past the noisy theater of the lion. Our passage talks about the devil wandering around like a roaring lion seeking whom he may destroy. I think the roar is a good description of one of the devil's main weapons against people. The New Testament makes it clear that once Jesus is raised from the dead and ascends into heaven, the devil has been defeated. He's been cast down from heaven. Jesus is Lord and Satan is in retreat. But one of the powers he still has is the power of noise and the fear that it creates. The devil wants you to live at the level of your fears and your worries because he always wants you to hear the roar of those fears and worries. When you wake up in the morning, he wants those problems roaring in your ears.

For the church of Asia Minor to whom Peter was writing, that means he wants those people waking up and thinking, "*My business is tanking because I am a Christian! What am I going to do! My neighbors are shutting me out! They think I'm a freak. What do I do!? Nero hates Christians! He's blaming them for everything what is he going to do to our church? Will my kids be safe!?*" He wants that to be a constant roar for them. For us 21st century people the roar is, "*The election! Covid 19! The unemployment rate! Society is becoming more secular!*" All that public noise gets combined with the noise of our private problems, "*My child is struggling! My wife is sick! I can't pay the bills! There's so much fighting in my family! I'm so lonely!*" All this stuff-all of it real, all of it important-it roars in our ears. "*Pay attention to me!*" "*Do something now!!*"

The evil one wants these things to take up all your energy and all your thought, because when all you hear is the roar, you will do desperate things. I was reading *Man's Search for Meaning* by Victor Frankl this week. Frankl spent time in the prison camps during World War Two, and he writes about how people responded in the camp. He suggests that it revealed the horizons of people's hope. In Auschwitz some of the prisoners were chosen as Capos. The Capos were delegated to control prisoners and keep them in line. In exchange for enforcing the rules, the Capos were given special powers and privileges by their Nazi captors. Sometimes, these Jewish Capos were harder on their fellow prisoners than the guards themselves. Frankl tells us that only the most brutal prisoners were chosen to be Capos, only the prisoners who were most focused on survival. They were the ones who "*had lost all scruples in their fight for existence; they were prepared to use every means honest and otherwise, even brute force, theft, and betrayal of*

friends in order to save themselves.” These prisoners couldn’t hear the voice of love and compassion any more. They could only hear the roar urging them to survive. If all you can hear is the lion’s roar, if all you can hear is the voice that says, “Do something! Do whatever it takes!” You will do desperate and depraved things. The roar will become your master. You will do the bidding of the roar. Fear and the anger rule you and you will turn to any means necessary to preserve yourself.

Peter keeps pointing us to heaven, because he doesn’t want us to get distracted by the roar. He wants us to see past these roaring things to the deeper things of Christ. To the Kingdom of God. To the reign of Jesus. To the living hope of the resurrection. To the love which holds all things. That’s why he keeps pointing us to the reality of heaven and the return of Jesus. He doesn’t want us to be captive to the roar.

I said earlier that the roar is always pushing you to do something. *“Do something! Now! Quickly! If you don’t do something all hope will be lost.”* When problems roar they demand action. But get to the level of heavenly things, get to the level where Peter wants to push you and it’s totally different. Put your heart and your mind in the heavenly places and the first thing you will hear is the voice of what God has done for you. *“You are God’s chosen.” “You have an inheritance that can never perish spoil or fade kept in heaven for you.” “You are shielded by God’s power till the coming salvation.” “Your God’s special possession.” “You have been bought with the precious blood of Christ.” “The God of all grace, has called you to eternal glory, and he will make you strong, firm and steadfast.”* There’s no roaring here. There is only the voice of love, reminding you of grace and love and promises that cannot be shaken.

Where do you want to start your day? Do you want to start with the roar and its demands? Or do you want to start with the promises, the grace, and the eternal hope of God that is ours in Jesus Christ our Lord? I choose the heavenly places. Before I turn my ears towards the demands of problems, I will tune them to the voice of Jesus so I can hear his word of love and promise.

Now of course, some may say, that’s just the problem with all you Christians and your heaven talk! You’re so heavenly minded, you’re no earthly good! You bask in the hope of eternity and you pay no attention to the injustices of the world. People are starving and dying, injustice is everywhere and you’re singing about the sweet by and by! But while that certainly does happen, it’s not what Peter calls for here, and that’s not how we live! We spend our time in the heavenly places hearing the world of hope and promise *so that* we can go back and face the roaring lion, so that we can go back and deal with the world’s problems. But now we can do it without panic, or desperation or excessive fear because we know who’s on the throne! It’s in the letter: Peter points to the promises and the hopes so that these people can live such good lives among the pagans that they see their good deeds and glorify God on the day he returns. Peter points these people to the promises of Christ’s return so that they can endure their suffering and respond to evil with blessing and good. The focus on heaven and Christ’s return doesn’t avoid the world’s problems, it gives us the strength to face them.

In 1947 Howard Thurman was a black scholar at Boston University and he gave a famous lecture at Harvard about the spirituals that came out of the culture of enslaved African Americans. He took on the criticism that these spirituals were too otherworldly, that they were just an escape from the realities of life. People said they focused on eternal rewards and made the slaves passive in the face of their troubles. Thurman totally rejected this idea. He said that the spirituals proclaimed the Christian belief in a final judgment, a day when all wrongs would be made right and justice would be done! The heavenly focus of these spirituals *“taught [slaves] how to ride high in life, to look squarely in the face of those facts that argue dramatically against*

all hope, and to use those facts as a raw material out of which they fashioned a hope that their environment, with all its cruelty could not crush...this enabled them to reject annihilation and affirm a terrible right to live.” It didn’t make them passive; it made them fierce, fierce in Jesus’ way.

On the day he accepted the Nobel peace prize, Martin Luther King made this very Christian statement, and I think it’s the kind of thing a person could only say if they had a strong and clear view of heaven. *“I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant.”* Peter said it even better when he concluded his letter by telling all of us hometown exiles, *“The God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.”*

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