

Hy 28:1,2,3,4  
Ps 119:22  
Ps 16:3,4,5  
Ps 73:8  
Hy 51:6,7,8  
1 Peter 1:1-21  
1 Peter 1:13b

Yarrow, September 6, 2009

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

A wedding in the family has a way of focusing your mind. It absorbs your thoughts, affects your conversation, determines your priorities.

The Christian has a bigger event to look forward to, one that focuses the mind and determines priorities in a more compelling way than a wedding ever would. That event is the appearing of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the passage before us today Peter encourages his readers to fix their focus on that Day-of-excitement, and then draws out what such a focus looks like.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

## **PETER INSTRUCTS THE REBORN TO FIX THEIR HOPE ON THE GRACE THAT COMES WITH CHRIST'S RETURN.**

1. Why the reborn focus on Christ's return
2. What this focus looks like,
3. How this focus affects life.

### **1. Why the reborn focus on Christ's return**

That Peter refers in our text to the return of Jesus Christ from heaven is clear enough. Then you would almost expect Peter to say: since Christ is coming any time, you need to watch how you live today. For you need to be ready for the Judge....

It's true that Peter in the passage we read together is promoting a certain manner of living. But his starting point for encouraging this manner of living is not the fact of Christ's return; his basic starting point for all he writes in 1 Peter is instead the reality of the Christian's *rebirth*. The reason for living the way you do, says Peter, is not that Christ will one day come to judge the living and the dead (other writers of the Bible may use that argument); Peter's reason for living the way you do is rooted in *what happened in the past*, in the reality of your rebirth – the material Peter had written about earlier in the chapter. That's why vs 13 begins with the word "therefore."

You'll remember what the preceding passage was about. We listened a couple of weeks ago to the apostle's shout of praise in vs 3: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!" What generated his excitement was specifically the reality of "new birth" (1:3b). One's view of reality inside the womb is so limited, so small – and Umbro the Unborn can't begin to imagine what opportunities are available to him once he's delivered from the confines of the womb. Well now, Peter had said, "we have been born anew", and that's to say that he and those with him have been delivered from the claustrophobic confines of the womb – yet his reference was not to physical birth but to spiritual birth. Reality as the naked eye sees it knows so much brokenness and frustration and tears and it invariably ends in death, and that brokenness, of course, is the bitter fruit of our fall into sin (Genesis 3:15ff). But Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead (1:3b), and with His resurrection we too have been delivered from the narrow worldview we were so long used to. We're raised to new life, and so brought into a

view of reality that includes reconciliation with God our Maker and so the uniting of heaven and earth. It's a "living hope" (vs 3b) that the glorious "inheritance" (vs 4a) God laid up for us in Jesus Christ is certainly ours. Soon our Saviour will be revealed from heaven ( vs 5), and we'll see our God face to face and delight in His glorious presence as children of the heavenly Father. All of it provides a most glorious perspective, a wide open view of a much bigger and richer reality than we could ever have imagined while we were still in the womb of this world – and it's this that prompted Peter to belt out his praise for God.

Of course, the spiritually reborn still live in this fallen world. Around us are countless fellow human beings who have not received the privilege of rebirth – and so their vision of reality is still limited to the narrow confines of the womb of this life; they can see no further than the walls of this world as the naked eye observes it. Then they see us doing the things born people do –crawling and walking and running, being excited about the opportunities of life-outside-the-womb– and they think we're funny, weird, strange. That contributes to the suffering Christians experience in this life (vs 6). We can understand that the unborn think we're weird, but it doesn't dampen our enthusiasm at the wealth the Lord has given to us is raising us to new life; life after birth is far more exciting than life before birth. So we join the apostle in his praise to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

That praise, though: might that simply be a matter of emotion, of song and joyful praise? (cf vs 3). The answer is No! The praise that invariably arises on account of the privilege of rebirth, of being delivered from a narrow view of life (as if life is only brokenness and pain) must result also –says Paul in our text– is "setting your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed." That's the force of the word 'therefore' with which vs 13 begins.

The last words of that phrase –"when Jesus Christ is revealed"– refers to the return of Jesus Christ to earth on the last day. Forty days after His resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ ascended into heaven with the promise that He would come again to this earth in the same way as He departed (Acts 1:11). In his second letter Peter shares his inspired understanding of what will happen on that great day. He says in 2 Peter 3:10: "the day of the Lord will come like a thief" – and that's to say that it comes as a surprise, unannounced, when one doesn't expect it. Suddenly the ascended Christ will be back, and when He comes "the heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare." The trappings of this world, life as we know it, will be no more. All that human hands have built over the centuries –civilizations and cultures, governments and institutions, airplanes and computers and houses and factories and highways and hydro dams– will be no more. Instead, there will be "a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness" (2 Peter 3:13). The fall into sin had closed the curtain so that fallen man could no longer perceive the reality of God, could no longer comprehend that the world God created was not just earth but heaven also (Genesis 1:1) – and so the meaning and purpose of life was lost, and we saw only the tears and frustration and pain of this broken existence. Those who by God's gracious election are "born again" were delivered from this narrow worldview to see reality again as God had created it; hence Peter's outburst of praise in 1:3. But even the reborn do not see God face to face yet, even the reborn do not see heaven and earth reunited today. They don't even see their risen Saviour, the One who gave them rebirth, because He's gone, He ascended. Theirs is the vision *of faith*, not sight. And since we're sinful still, it's easy for the reborn to *act as if they're unborn*.

That, brothers and sisters, is why the apostle gives the command of our text. Peter's reborn addressees, living as they still do in this fallen world where they're treated as 'strangers' and 'aliens' (vs 1) need to look further than their nose and that's to say that they need to "set [their] hope fully on the grace to be given [them] when Jesus Christ is revealed." In today's continuing brokenness, these Christians need to fix their focus on heaven from where they await their full redemption when Jesus Christ returns. One day, any day, He who through His resurrection from the dead pierced the walls of

the womb of this life will appear without warning on the clouds of heaven, and then all the brokenness that continues to plague this claustrophobic life will be gone, completely gone!

I said, “these Christians need to *fix their focus* on heaven from where they await Jesus Christ.” Peter actually uses the term ‘hope’, and that comes back in our translation as “set your hope....” We use the word ‘hope’ repeatedly in our conversations to convey the notion of a wish: “I hope it doesn’t rain tomorrow....” But there’s uncertainty in it; perhaps tomorrow it will rain. In the Bible the word ‘hope’ has no element of uncertainty in it; it rather captures the notion of ‘conviction’. The point then is: you’re absolutely certain that Jesus Christ is coming again. More, when He comes He brings grace for you. Precisely because you’re absolutely certain of that, you do your daily work with one eye on the heavens. More: the certainty of His coming determines your priorities, fills your head and your conversations – just as a family wedding does.

Do you, brothers and sisters, follow Peter’s logic? When one is born one has exited the womb and entered a whole new world; we understand that. When one is *reborn* one has also entered a whole new world *and yet we at the same time remain in this fallen world living side by side with the spiritually unborn*. Somehow, then, our rebirth is not yet fully complete; we’re not yet fully restored to Paradise and we do not yet see with our eyes that heaven and earth are reunited. So: while the reborn wait for the full benefits of their rebirth to appear, they need –says Peter– to *set their hope* on the blessed fruit of their rebirth, they need to fix their focus on the Christ they know is coming soon and the grace He’s bringing with Him. That’s Peter’s instruction; *such focus is the obvious consequence flowing from the reality of rebirth*.

Fixing their focus on the return they know is coming is, then, something the reborn *want* to do. The reborn long for Christ to come soon precisely because that’s when they get the fullness of the inheritance laid up for them in heaven. Then Christ’s grace for them is complete.

It raises a question, and it’s this: is your daily focus in fact fixed on the coming of Jesus Christ? Yet to answer that question, we need more detail about what this focus actually looks like in real life. It’s our second point:

## 2. What this focus looks like.

Our translation of vs 13 has Peter giving his readers three commands, the first being to “prepare your minds for action,” the second being “be self-controlled”, and the third “set your hope fully on the grace....” In point of fact, there is in the Greek but one command here, and that’s the words of our text, vs 13b: “set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed.” The other two phrases, the references to “preparing your minds” and “being self-controlled”, give the detail of *what it takes* to be focused on Christ’s grace – and so help explain what a focus on Christ’s return actually looks like.

The first of these phrases is translated for us as “prepare your minds for action.” That translation doesn’t convey the picture Peter paints. Other translations correctly render Peter’s phrase as “girding up the loins of your mind” (cf NKJV, NASB). Instead of pants the men of old used to wear a robe that covered the legs down to the ankles. We realize that a robe of such length made working awkward, let alone running. So, when the rains were about to fall on Israel after the three years of drought, Elijah “tucked his cloak into his belt” and “ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel” (1 Kings 18:46). The Hebrew uses there the same expression as Peter uses; Elijah “girded up his loins” (NKJV).

Yet Peter is not wanting his readers to pull up their long robe for a physical run. He wants them instead to “gird up the loins of your mind.” His point is this: just as the long robe hinders you from running well, so there can be things in your mind that hinder you from focusing. That’s something we all know from experience. We respect that a person grieving the loss of a loved one needs some time off work; a mind filled with life’s pain accomplishes little.

Peter wants his readers to set their hope, to fix their focus on the grace that comes with rebirth, the fullness of which they'll receive when Christ comes again. What does fixing your focus on Christ's appearing look like? It involves "girding up the loins of your mind," and that's to say that you get rid of any clutter in your mind that could distract you from Christ's appearing. We can easily think of examples. One can be so obsessed with 'stuff' that the things of this life –be it *getting* them or *keeping* them– absorbs one's time and energy – and so there's no headspace left for anticipating Jesus Christ. One can be so concentrated on *self* –be it the fear that others think you're a loser or the conviction that you're pretty good– that there isn't room left to think about others, let alone the return of the Saviour. One can be so absorbed in one's marriage or family or work that anything else takes a distant second place. All of it, says Peter, hinders you from placing your focus where it needs to be, and so you need repeatedly to pull up your robe and tuck it into your belt. That is: you need to arrange the thoughts of your mind in such a way that your new view on reality (and that's the result of being born again) stays central in your thinking. You know you're no longer trapped inside the narrow confines of a worldview that has no place for God, you know you're delivered from the confines of life's brokenness and pain, you know you're born again into a living hope that includes a glorious inheritance, you know that Christ will come again to reunite heaven and earth and that then you'll see God face to face and receive the fullness of your inheritance. This is all so exciting, and so your focus –just as a wedding– is on His coming – and you'll get rid of any clutter in your mind that hinders that focus.

Peter uses a second term, this one rendered for us as "be self-controlled". Other translations render it as "be sober". The word Peter uses captures the opposite of being drunk. Peter, though, is not so much arguing against literal drunkenness (though that too) as against metaphorical drunkenness – being drunk with the things of this world. You can be so full of the alcohol of worldliness or of the alcohol of selfishness or of the alcohol of the pleasures of this life that you can't see reality anymore. Worldliness, selfishness, and the pleasures of this life characterize those who are still trapped in the narrow confines of the worldview-of-the-womb. You, though, says Peter, are born again, have been delivered from that narrow view on reality. So: be so level-headed and so clear-minded and so sober as to take that reality seriously. Instead of being caught up in the things that the unborn get drunk on (for this broken life is as good as it gets, so you may as well make the most of it), the reborn need to be sober so that they can fix their hope on Christ's coming – the Day you'll get your inheritance. We catch the point: fixing your focus on Christ *looks like something*, and part of the look is that we're not drunk on the things of this broken life – that'll all get burned up when Christ comes back anyway.

In vs 14-16 Paul uses a third concept to explain what this fixation on Christ's return looks like. Do not, he says, "conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance." "When you lived in ignorance" is, of course, a reference to the time before their rebirth, the time when they lived in the limited and incomplete worldview of *this* world-as-the-eye-sees-it. In that limited worldview there wasn't place for God and so the evil desires of our fallen nature could dictate what they wished. But now, says Peter, you are children of a heavenly Father, you have been born anew. So: "do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance." That is, don't shape your behaviour by those old desires.

What then? Peter continues, "But just as He who called you is holy" –and that's God; He chose them for deliverance from Satan's side, chose them for rebirth– "just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do." And that's no new command; already at Mt Sinai the Lord God had told His people-by-covenant to "be holy, because I am holy" (cf Leviticus 11:44f; 19:2; 20:7).

Just what, though, is meant by the word 'holy'? There is much, very much, brothers and sisters, that one can say about holiness. But it is sufficient for now to note that holiness means that one *takes God's God-ness seriously*. When the people of Israel lived in Egypt, God's God-ness was not obvious to them, wasn't something *in their face*. After their marvellous deliverance from Egypt, God's identity was much more obvious to them. That was especially so at Mt Sinai, when they saw the majesty of God on

the mountain – so much so that the mountain quaked so greatly that the people were overwhelmed. That’s when God said to them in Leviticus: “be holy, because I am holy.” Point: act in a way that demonstrates that you know Who I really am.

For Peter’s writers the point is even more urgent. For Peter’s readers have not simply been delivered from Egypt; they’ve been “born again” into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. That is: they’ve been delivered from the narrow worldview resulting from the fall into sin (with all its tears and frustrations and pain) and have received new life in Jesus Christ so that they are reconciled to God Himself, yes, God is their Father! What wonderful deliverance, what grace from God! The Christ who raised you is in heaven, but He’s coming any day, and when He comes the fullness of His goodness will be yours; you’ll receive the glorious inheritance He has prepared for you! Talk about something to focus your mind! But obviously, then you’re going to live a certain way! How?? You’ll not shape your behaviour by what’s important in this fallen world, but you’ll be holy as God is holy; you’ll be so focused on the coming of Jesus Christ that you obviously take seriously God’s glorious identity all the time.

So we’re back to the question I asked before: is your daily focus *in fact* fixed on Jesus Christ’s return? That’s our third point:

### 3. How this focus affects life

What, brothers and sisters, does your life actually look like when you’ve said Yes to the man of your dreams, and the wedding is around the corner? We know it well: everything you do revolves in some way around that man and that day. Your love for him, your anticipation of the big day, determines your priorities and your interests. That’s obvious to us. Avoiding activity that somehow clashes with your love for him and your expectations of that Day is not a penalty, is not hard, is not a *must*; you know, for example, that you have to stay clear of two-timing because you’re *his* lady.

So it is here. Peter’s whole point in this section of his first chapter is that the Christian’s future is so glorious on account of the rebirth that happened in the past that the Christian is totally one-eyed on the great event to come, so totally focused on it that this one single coming event determines his priorities and his activities. So much is he *God’s child* (because of his rebirth) that he can’t wait to meet his Father face to face –as shall happen on the day of Christ’s return– and so he’s holy in this life as his Father in heaven is holy. To the Christian’s way of thinking, heaven and earth are not two separate parts of God’s creation, and this life is not separated from the life to come either, but his rebirth has given him the wherewithal to look past the narrow look of this world (with its brokenness and sin) and understand that soon the Christ who arose from the dead will come again – and then shall be the marriage feast of the Lamb.

That eager anticipation of that wonderful day automatically and inevitably leads to a lifestyle of holiness, one that steers clear from sin as much as God steers clear from sin. More, it leads to a lifestyle that has no fixation on the toys and treasures of this life, but is instead focused on being as ready as possible for the great Day, indeed, making that great Day as wonderful as possible for all concerned.

Here, congregation, is where we have work to do. How *eager* are you for Christ’s return? How much does the reality of His coming determine what you do and how you do it? If the expectation of Christ’s coming was as big a thing on your mind as the anticipation of your wedding day, what would actually change in your lifestyle, in your priorities, in your conversation, in your thinking?

I read somewhere that Christianity has lost its power because Christians aren’t excited anymore about the return of Jesus Christ, they aren’t excited about heaven and the resulting perfection. Yet that is precisely Peter’s command in our text: you’ve been born again; *therefore* “set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed.” And such a fixation *looks like something* – just as anticipation for your wedding is obvious.